

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Strong Press, Strong Democracy

No Free Lunch

How to split the tab for news

ALISSA QUART: Free culture's cost

PETER OSÑOS: What's fair in a link economy?

MICHAEL SHAPIRO: The case for a free/paid hybrid

DAVID SIMON: Build a wall, take a stand

NEW MISSIONARIES FOR NEWS

Inside the movement to build an audience of citizens

MEGAN GARBER

HEALTH CARE'S GROUNDHOG DAY

Why today's debate sounds like '93, and what to do about it

TRUDY LIEBERMAN

LIAR, LIAR

Daniel Defoe's bad habit

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COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

July/August 2009

"To assess the performance of journalism... to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair, and decent."

—from the founding editorial, 1961



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**You don't need
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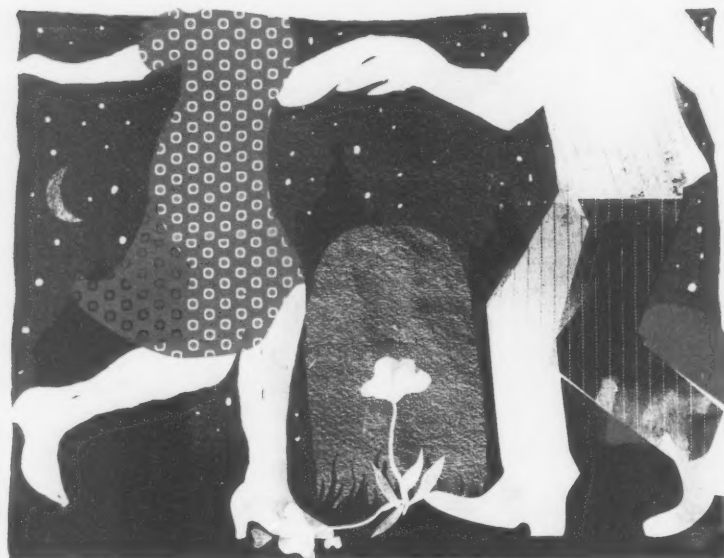
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Opening Shot



This year, the cost of medical care will consume 17.6 percent of the nation's GDP, compared with 13.7 percent in 1994. The number of Americans without insurance, meanwhile, is projected to rise to 52 million next year, up from 37 million in the early 1990s. Citizens pay more and get less. As *The Washington Post* put it recently, "For more than a decade, researchers have documented the inequities, shortcomings, waste, and even dangers in the hodgepodge of uncoordinated medical services that consume nearly one-fifth of the nation's economy." We're told that the major players in health care are about ready to accept a solution to all this. Yet, as Trudy Lieberman writes on page 15 of this issue, a real solution will require those players—insurers, doctors, hospitals, and drug companies—to sacrifice, and it's not clear that they are ready. In this situation, the job of the press is to try to make sure that the public is a player, too, that Americans understand what any emerging reform bill means for them. As with many issues, this requires serious reporting. And that raises another question: Who will pay? More voices these days are arguing that the vast giveaway of journalistic content under way on the Internet is a historic mistake, and that readers must inevitably be asked to shoulder more of the costs of gathering news. How does that work? In our cover package, starting on page 20, we explore the question from four angles, with pieces by Alissa Quart, Peter Osnos, David Simon, and Michael Shapiro. We hope you enjoy it. **CJR**

On hold Patients wait to be seen in the emergency room at Children's Hospital Central California, in Madera.



The Grave Dancer's Folly

Blaming newspapers for their plight is a waste of precious time

Despite the tedious posturing of both Web triumphalists (Jeff Jarvis to the Newspaper Association of America: "You blew it!") and ideologues on either end of the political spectrum (two recent reader comments on CJR.org: "The mainstream media has sold out to our corporate controlled Congress," and "News-papers deserve to die like *Pravda* and *Izvestia* [sic]"), nobody is winning the debate over what the future of journalism will

look like. For all the unhelpful pronouncements from the futurists of "innovate or die," none of the innovations thus far has produced the kind of public-service journalism that our newspapers, at their best, still manage to deliver.

Earlier this year, Clay Shirky, who, as Web triumphalists go is a mild and often extremely thoughtful case, published an assessment of the plight of newspapers in which he said as much, likening the current predicament to the decades following Gutenberg's invention of the printing press: "So who covers all that news if some significant fraction of the currently employed newspaper people lose their jobs? ... I don't know. Nobody knows. We're collectively living through 1500, when it's easier to see what's broken than what will replace it."

So let's get past 1500—and past the blind faith that the future will take care of itself. A first step: stop the glib sniping about how newspapers are reaping what they've sown.

Yes, newspapers behaved for decades like arrogant

monopolists. But they also have been an increasingly lonely bastion for serious journalism, and therefore must figure prominently in whatever journalistic future emerges.

In other words, the snipers and the snipees need each other. Rather than punish newspapers for their sins, we should work to find ways to preserve and transfer their most important attributes to a digital era, even as we push them to adapt to new financial, technological, and cultural realities.

Again, Shirky: "Society doesn't need newspapers. What we need is journalism.... When we shift our attention from 'save newspapers' to 'save society,' the imperative changes from 'preserve the current institutions' to 'do whatever works.' And what works today isn't the same as what used to work."

True, but what has *always* worked for journalism is the public-service mission, the idea that it is crucial to have people who *make their living* by going out into the world and doing their imperfect best to tell us what is happening there and why—especially when it involves those things that powerful people and institutions would rather we not know.

It's not glamorous work. Listen to Eric Schlosser describe the lengths he went to to make sure his book, *Fast Food Nation*, was as accurate as possible:

I hired a factchecker... who'd worked at *The New Yorker*. He challenged every single assertion of fact in the book. And I hired a libel attorney.... Both went over the manuscript with a fine-tooth comb. I did have to cut a few pages describing some allegedly fraudulent

business practices by one of the big meatpacking companies. Since I couldn't prove it, I couldn't include it.

We need professional journalism. It doesn't have to be delivered on paper; it need not be produced by omnibus newsrooms with twelve hundred reporters and editors; and it can surely be complemented by amateur efforts. But it must be done by people who have the time for, and commitment to, the kind of painstaking work that Schlosser describes. It is not something one does in his spare time, or when inspiration strikes. It is a job.

A problem with Shirky's Gutenberg analogy is that, in 1500 the transition was from nothing to something—a rapid *expansion* of news and information. Today we face the prospect of, at least in terms of serious journalism, going from something to nothing. We can't afford to lose the engine of our news and information culture before we know how to replace it. **CJR**

Is repeatedly lying a violation of journalistic ethics?



INSERT YOUR WORDS HERE

The Associated Press has breached basic journalistic principles with these false reports:

THESE STATEMENTS ARE FALSE, and on both occasions, the AP has admitted that they are false. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez never called on anyone to support the armed struggle of the FARC - rather, he had called on the FARC to abandon armed struggle. And far from blaming Jews for an attack on a synagogue, he denounced the attack as anti-Semitic and took prompt action to find and arrest the attackers.

We call on the Associated Press to take action to ensure that this kind of false reporting is not repeated.

STEVE ELLNER, Professor of Political Science, University of Oriente, Venezuela • LESLEY GILL, Professor and Chair of Anthropology, Vanderbilt University • GREG GRANDIN, Professor of History, New York University • DANIEL HELLINGER, Professor of Political Science, Webster University • DIANE NELSON, Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University • JOCELYN OLCOTT, Associate Chair, Department of History, Duke University • WILLIAM I. ROBINSON, Professor of Sociology, University of California-Santa Barbara • MIGUEL TINKER SALAS, Professor of History, Pomona College • T.M. SCRUGGS, Professor, School of Music, University of Iowa • JOHN WOMACK, Professor of History, Harvard University

"... [Hugo] Chavez initially suggested the synagogue attack might have been carried out by Jews eager to portray his government as anti-Semitic."

— AP, FEBRUARY 8, 2009

"Only five months after urging world leaders to back their armed struggle, he [Chávez] said that armed guerrilla movements are 'history.'"

—AP, JUNE 10, 2008

Smoke Signals

Dean Starkman's presumption ("Power Problem," *CJR*, May/June) that if these nine publications missed the story, no one got it right, gets things exactly backward. Our biggest publications did the worst job, on the whole, of providing suitably probing and skeptical coverage. But readers of numerous local and regional publications were served a wonderful array of stories that provided ample warning of brewing problems. Reporters from these publications saw foreclosed homes and failed banks firsthand, long before our biggest publications took notice.

Cynic

Comment posted on CJR.org

Act Local

I agree with Walter Pincus ("Newspaper Narcissism," *CJR*, May/June). National homogeneity is not what I want from a newspaper. I want idiosyncrasy. Put the local-news section first, with expanded coverage and with an opinion page dealing exclusively with local issues. Put national and international news and opinion in its own section. Place more emphasis on local amateur and school sports in the sports section. Create or enhance a section that covers price comparisons between grocery stores, prescription costs, and pharmacy prices, the cheapest auto insurance, etc. This should be aimed at lower- and middle-income readers. In short, make the newspaper an indispensable daily tool.

Joseph L. Paris
La Mesa, CA

I have the greatest respect for Walter Pincus, but he uses fuzzy math in his essay. He writes, "NYTimes.com had some twenty million unique users for the month of October.... The newspaper is sold to 800,000 readers a day, rising on Sunday to over 1 million. Without thinking, someone might say the *Times* Web site readership far exceeds the newspaper's. But the definition of



National homogeneity is not what I want from a newspaper. I want idiosyncrasy.

unique visitor is someone who within a month's time visits the Web site more than once. It is not apples to apples, but by dividing the twenty million a month by thirty you get at best roughly 667,000 readers a day, which is short of the paper's daily circulation."

If you divide 20 million unique visitors a month by thirty days, you do indeed get about 667,000. But Pincus assumes that each unique visitor comes to the Post Web site only once during the month, when many readers visit more than once. Six hundred and sixty-seven thousand readers a day is the lowest number of visitors in a range up to 20 million.

Bill Dedman
Philadelphia, PA

Not So Fast

In "A Matter of Trust" (*CJR*, May/June), J.J. Goldberg writes that U.S. and British news outlets, in covering allegations

of Israeli misconduct in Gaza, missed "bits of information," omissions that "can go a long way, intentionally or not, in tilting a story." As if to demonstrate the truth of this observation, Goldberg's analysis is itself tilted by the omission of key information. While he correctly points out that the Israeli soldiers—whose testimony was the basis for the numerous stories in *Haaretz*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and other outlets—admitted their stories were based only on hearsay, he neglected to mention that that admission was available to reporters as early as March 19. Meanwhile, beginning on March 20, *The New York Times* and other news outlets trumpeted what they wrongly called "eyewitness accounts" of Israeli atrocities—after it was already clear that the allegations were dubious at best.

It seems that reporters on both sides of the Atlantic were a bit too eager to condemn Israel.

Gilead Ini
Senior Research Analyst, Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA)
Boston, MA

J.J. Goldberg responds: Among the soldiers who told their stories at the Rabin academy in February, two drew the bulk of media attention because they told of shootings of civilian women. Other soldiers in the group told of witnessing brutality, vandalism, disregard of property, and scattered shooting that they thought needlessly threatened civilians, but those accounts were lost in the media uproar.

The two soldiers who told of the shootings were immediately questioned by the army, and were quoted afterward as admitting that those two particular accounts were based on second-hand accounts. An eleven-day investigation followed, producing evidence refuting the accounts of killings, and the army dismissed the soldiers' allegations as

uncorroborated and likely false. There was no further investigation of the other allegations—brutality, vandalism, etc.—which, in contrast, were largely direct-eyewitness accounts; numerous other soldiers have given similar accounts. Whether or not the two shooting deaths did take place, there is little reason to doubt the broader description of coarseness that so shocked Israelis. And no, whatever foreign audiences might have gotten out of it, it wasn't the allegations of killings alone that sparked Israel's national soul-searching, but rather the broader portrait of brutality, which has not been refuted.

What Workers Want

In "Identity Crisis" (CJR, May/June), Liza Featherstone faults the *Journal* for a story on the nation's best and worst jobs, saying: "It sheds no light on the nature of present-day capitalism. How could it? It was reported and written from a desk." I found that amusing because in your March/April issue, Featherstone took apart a survey that Robert Levering and I do for *Fortune* on the hundred best companies to work for by reporting from her desk. She didn't interview any of the employees of the companies she trashed. She never bothered to talk to us or to anybody at *Fortune*. She neglected to inform CJR readers about the methodology behind this survey. She simply junked it because it did not conform to her idea of a good workplace: one where workers are represented by a union.

Milton Moskowitz
Mill Valley, CA

The editors respond: To the contrary, Featherstone did interview employees of some of the companies. And she did call the Great Places to Work® Institute, the consultant that puts together *Fortune's* annual Best Companies to Work For list, but never got a call back. Since the piece took the form of annotation rather than an article, space was limited, but in retrospect, we wish we'd included more about the Institute's methodology. The charge that Featherstone simply likes unions is absurd. She—and CJR—think a journalistically sound list of the best employers should better reflect what employees appreciate most: decent wages and benefits.

NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

IN OUR MAY 26 NEWS MEETING, WE ASKED OUR ONLINE READERS WHICH beach-reading books they would recommend for current and aspiring journalists. We came up with plenty of choices that should make for diverse and entertaining summer reading.

Recommended reading is a familiar classic, perhaps not familiar enough given its essential themes: the social uses of knowledge, individual heroism in the face of repression, the conflict of modernity and tradition. Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo* is as contemporary today as when it was written in the thirties, when Brecht had fled his native Germany to escape the Nazis. —Norman Birnbaum

Be the Media is a must-read for every current and future journalist. *The Eliminationist*, unfortunately, is a must-read for anyone covering politics or issues in American now. —Curtis Walker

A Matter of Opinion by one Victor S. Navasky. I read this recently, and it certainly qualifies as beach reading for Navasky's whimsical prose, but it is much more than that. *The Age of American Unreason* by Susan Jacoby is also a great read, which discusses the degradation of American intellectual capital—important for journalists. —Darius

Doesn't matter that it was published in 1986, Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* should be required reading for anyone purporting to be a journalist. The man just saw the forest. —Steve Daley

People want you to read lots of history and policy, but not one thing science-related. You'd think we lived in the thirteenth century. On the assumption that science is at least as important to our future as anything else, I suggest you read Lee Smolin's *The Trouble With Physics*, Chris Mooney's *The Republican War on Science*, Jerry Coyne's *Why Evolution Is True*, and David Park's *The How and the Why*. —Paul Camp

Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier*, which explains exactly, step by step, how well-connected people arrange gigantic swindles and bond-related malfeasances. —Todd Gitlin

EDITOR'S NOTE

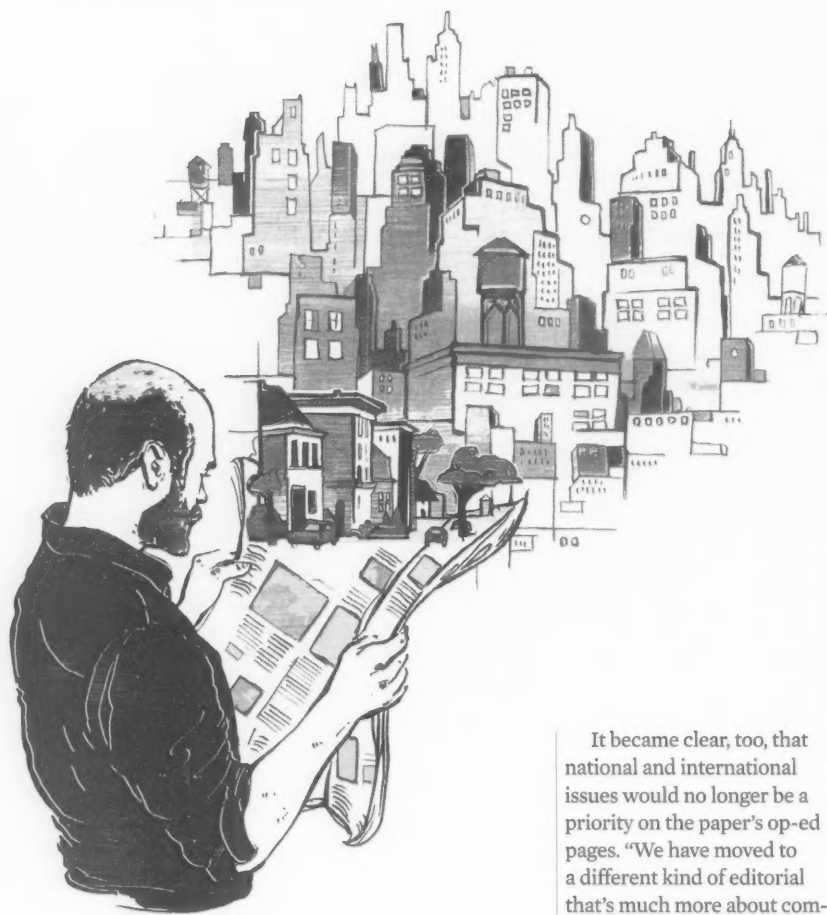
FIRST, A FOND FAREWELL: WE WANT TO PUBLICLY THANK OUR PUBLISHER, Evan Cornog, for six years of stalwart service to CJR, now that he is leaving Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism for new frontiers. Evan helped steer us through challenging waters, including fiscal adventures and our big moves online, all with grace and wit. We appreciate it, and we wish him the best.

Second, a question: How do journalists get paid these days for the news and analysis that they produce? As readers move to the Web, it seems clear that revenue from Web advertising is not holding up its end of the table. How do we sustain newsrooms in a free-culture, free-content world? Everybody in the business is trying to untangle this knot. So, for our cover package, we set four strong writers on the problem, with provocative results. The package starts on page 20.

CJR not only covers this economic challenge; we're living it, too. Soon, we'll have our own partial paywall in place. It will work this way: all of our online-only content at CJR.org, our lively daily Web site, will remain free, as will about a third of our print-magazine stories online (for six months after publication). The rest of our magazine content, new and old, will be available only to subscribers. We'll keep you posted here and on CJR.org.

—Mike Hoyt

Currents



Global Village

Let's not call this a trend. Not yet, please. In April, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the paper that championed civil rights in the South in the 1950s and '60s, announced that it was moving Cynthia Tucker, its Pulitzer-winning columnist and editorial page director, to Washington and replacing most of its editorial board.

It became clear, too, that national and international issues would no longer be a priority on the paper's op-ed pages. "We have moved to a different kind of editorial that's much more about community issues and less about, 'let me opine on national issues,'" editor Julia Wallace told *The New York Times*.

It's a stunning development, and one I fear is contagious: this notion that regional newspapers—and the *AJC* has been among the best nationwide—should reflect only local concerns. If ever columnists could help to make sense of the world, it is now, as papers continue to shrink news holes for national and international coverage.

Increasingly though, regional columnists tell me they feel pressure to eschew the bigger picture. Readers, their editors insist, want locally focused columns. But pretending the rest of the world doesn't exist does not make it so, and we shouldn't enshrine this myopia. World news is local news, and a columnist can expand readers' sight lines to see that what happens in China affects them too. We learn that lesson repeatedly here in Ohio, which has lost over 250,000 manufacturing jobs and ranks fifth among states in war deaths. Few here would argue that the two wars, and trade policies with China, are someone else's problems.

As a columnist at the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and with my editor's blessing, I address both tipping policies at local restaurants and civil rights protests in Pakistan. But ever more, I feel the need to tip the balance toward national and international news as our paper culls such coverage. Last year, for example, we failed to publish a news story about—or even point readers to—*New York Times* reporter David Barstow's astonishing story about the Pentagon's behind-the-scenes manipulation of network and cable news coverage of the Iraq war: Pentagon-coached former military officers masquerading on air as independent observers, and failing to mention ties to military contractors profiting from the very policies they were asked

'I came upon an epigraph that reminded me of her and her hunger: "I wanted to do business faster than the ordinary mercantile transactions would admit." That was said by P. T. Barnum.'
—Isaac Chotiner, profiling Arianna Huffington in *The New Republic*

to evaluate. I weighed in, noting that newspapers had frequently quoted from these interviews and published op-eds by some of these men.

Why did this story matter at the local level? Most Americans get most of their news from TV, and Barstow's story, which won a Pulitzer this year, was a jarring reminder of the perils of that dependency. I received hundreds of calls and e-mails from readers thanking me for discussing it; many had read about it for the first time in my column.

Like most journalists today, many newspaper columnists fear losing their jobs, and so some spoke cautiously, or off the record. Most said they feel pressure—self-imposed or from editors—to emphasize local issues. Others mentioned treading a middle ground.

"I understand the paper wanting to serve up local news and flavor to our readers," *Buffalo News* columnist Charity Vogel said via e-mail. When writing about national issues, she said, "I do readers a service by 'bringing them home.'"

Addressing the AIG bailout, for example, Vogel contrasted executives' excesses on the taxpayers' dime to many of her readers' daily lives: "Your tax dollars went to a spa that charges \$350 for a 60-minute 'Mediterranean harmony' massage—while you are struggling to meet the mortgage so you can keep a roof over your kids' heads." The column got a



A KIND OF VICTORY

"EL SALVADOR IS NOW THE MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRY in the world for foreign journalists," NBC's John Chancellor told viewers on January 15, 1981. He had just reported that, while covering the conflict between U.S.-backed government forces and the leftist FMLN guerrillas, Olivier Rebbot, a French photographer freelancing for *Newsweek*, had been shot in the chest (seen here moments before; he later died in Miami). The civil war killed 75,000, including more journalists than the war in Vietnam. And the right stayed in power.

This year the FMLN, a political party since the war's end in 1992, finally found victory: its candidate, Mauricio Funes, became president on June 1. A former TV journalist, Funes got his start covering the war, and lost a brother to the fighting. For many, the triumph closes a brutal chapter in Salvadoran history—though not entirely. Recently, former *Time* photographer Harry Mattison returned to San Francisco Gotera, where Rebbot was shot. Standing near the corner where he had shielded his wounded friend's body, Mattison offered words Funes may understand. "Maybe you don't cut yourself quite so sharply on the memories...but it never goes away." (For images from the war by Rebbot and others, visit cjr.org/behind_the_news/victory_php.) —Jacques Menasche

lot of response from Buffalo residents outraged over corporate waste.

Such columns illustrate the value of regional columnists weighing in on the big issues of the day, argues David Shribman, execu-

tive editor of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. He has resisted hyper-local coverage at his paper, particularly by his columnists. "When the columnist has an expertise or point of view that comes out of living in Pittsburgh but is

HARD NUMBERS

40 percent of newspaper editors and publishers (of 351 surveyed) who said they are devoting more space to "hyper-local" news while decreasing the pages devoted to national and international stories

72 percent of respondents who said they are remaining in their jobs because they believe in the mission of journalism

28 percent of respondents who said they plan to charge for online content

\$6.6 billion earned in print and online advertising sales in the first quarter of 2009, compared to \$9.2 billion earned over the same period the previous year (a 28.3 percent decline)

710,000 metric tons of newsprint consumed in the U.S. in April 2003

350,000 metric tons of newsprint consumed in the U.S. in April 2009

285,394 new books published by print-on-demand companies in the U.S. in 2008, a 132 percent increase from the year before

275,232 new books and editions from U.S. publishers in 2008, a 3.2 percent drop from the year before

202 bilingual newspapers in the U.S. in 2008 (with a combined circulation of 5.6 million), an increase of at least forty from 2007

8 percent of these bilingual papers that have paid circulation

The Associated Press Managing Editors, Newspaper Association of America, Bowker, New American Media, World Association of Newspapers

relevant to what is happening nationally, I want that perspective," he told me. "And our readers know our writers better than they know Tom Friedman or Maureen Dowd. They trust our columnists to provide context."

For years, *Miami Herald* columnist Leonard Pitts has withstood occasional pressure from editors to narrow his focus. "That attitude that 'it only matters if it happens in my town' doesn't work for me, as a columnist or as a person," Pitts said to me. "I don't care if it happens in Miami or Cleveland or Kalamazoo, if it interests me, I'm going to write about it." He added, "It's about putting the pieces together, making sense of it all."

As newspapers' coverage of the world shrinks, the informed columnist will become more valuable. We don't live in a vacuum, and if we fail to draw connections to events beyond our county lines, we fail our readers in their roles as global citizens.

Many columnists say readers aren't asking for such a limited worldview. When asked how many readers

have complained that he doesn't write enough about local issues, Pitts's answer was swift, unequivocal: "Not one. Not ever. Editors sometimes complain, but I've never heard that from a reader."

—Connie Schultz

Schultz won the Pulitzer for Commentary in 2005.

Into the Fold

REGULAR WATCHERS OF ESPN

—that is, all sports fans—may have noticed the network has begun allotting more airtime to the voices of fans. In July, a new show called *Sports Nation* will "focus on topics that dominate fans' e-mail exchanges and blogs," proclaims a press release.

(ESPN rival Versus has plans for a similar show.) Episodes of *SportsCenter* now include regular "Blog Buzz" segments to take the pulse of the Internet. And the "Worldwide Leader" runs daily polls and features fan commentary.

This programming strategy isn't just an attempt to monetize audience participation—it's a canny co-opting of the enemy. Emerging from

the industry's vast fan base, sports bloggers have policed the mainstream sports media in unprecedented ways. Their growth has mirrored the rise of political blogs that check the government and the establishment media that cover it. Yet while sites like Daily Kos and The Huffington Post still maintain opposition status, sports blogs are becoming part of the mass-media establishment they set themselves against.

The breakthrough moment took place in the spring and summer of 2007. Mike Florio, a lawyer and NFL fan who runs the Web site Pro Football Talk, noticed that the mainstream sports media were taking very casually allegations that a dog-fighting ring was being run out of the home of Michael Vick, then the Atlanta Falcons' star quarterback. Parsing the case, Florio insisted on his site that this was very bad news for Vick. His considerable readership in NFL-media circles kept the story afloat, until ESPN and *Sports Illustrated* finally unleashed their investigative units on Vick. The rest, of course, is history.

It was a triumph for the blogosphere similar to that of Josh Marshall and Talking Points Memo almost single-handedly fanning the flames of the U.S. attorneys scandal.

Other examples targeted the likes of ESPN more directly. When Michael Irvin, at the time an ESPN analyst, made racially insensitive remarks on a radio show, the brushfire created on sports blogs forced Irvin to apologize. (He was quietly let go a few months later.) And massive online protest to *Monday Night Football's* habit of forcing celebrities into game coverage led to ESPN dropping in-game guests.

Recognizing an unwinnable war when they see one (ESPN famously blacklisted former Deadspin editor Will Leitch, which Leitch naturally assumed as a badge of honor), the mainstream sports media have decided to keep these guerrillas close. Sportscasters seldom deride bloggers as people writing from their mothers' basements anymore—theirs is a more symbiotic relationship now. Popular bloggers, gone mainstream at AOL Fanhouse, opine alongside veteran sportswriters like Jason Whitlock and Jay Mariotti, a pair who have been heavily criticized in the blogosphere. ESPN has embraced SportsPickle.com's D.J. Gallo, and Henry Abbott of the True Hoop blog.

That doesn't mean the next time one of the big boys goofs, the blogs won't make it a cause célèbre. But the mainstream's willingness to incorporate these voices into the fold has quieted the continual uproar heard online just a few years ago. Perhaps that was the plan.

—Robert Weintraub

LANGUAGE CORNER THE GLOVES COME OFF

Write LanguageCorner@cjr.org

JOURNALISTS HAVE BEEN CAUTIONED FOR MANY YEARS TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN "gauntlet" and "gantlet." It ain't working.

A "gauntlet," we're told, is a challenge. A "gauntlet" was a glove worn by knights, and a man, insulted or just itching for a fight, would remove it and "throw down the gauntlet" in a challenge. The challengee would "take up the gauntlet."

A "gantlet," on the other hand, we're told, is an ordeal, or a punishing test—think of two lines of frat brothers paddling pledges as they run past. A person must "run the gantlet" to escape.

But "gantlet" has also been spelled "gauntlet" for, oh, four hundred years now. And they both mean an ordeal or challenge of some sort. Most dictionaries have blended "gantlet" into "gauntlet," some by calling "gauntlet" a "variant" of "gantlet." The venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* has no separate entry for "gantlet"; the definition is under "gauntlet." Some usage guides, including the Associated Press and *New York Times* stylebooks and *Garner's Modern American Usage*, keep the distinctions. They're "throwing down the gauntlet" against common usage, but, alas, few are taking it up. Perhaps it's time to throw in the towel.

—Merrill Perlman



LAUREL to *The Arizona Republic* for "Perfectly Legal," a series of six articles, published in May, that exposed a network of charities that were inflating their balance sheets—

and their image as efficient do-gooders—by claiming tax breaks on donated goods that they never actually handled.

The yearlong investigation analyzed the tax returns of this network, including the paper trail for a crate containing 8,884 pounds of medicine and medical supplies from a charity in Canada to the balance sheets of charities in St. Louis and Glendale, California—even as the crate remained in a warehouse operated by yet another charity outside this network. At each "stop" along the crate's virtual journey, a charity in the network claimed the full value of the supplies on its tax return. (Eventually, the medicine ended up at missions in Guatemala and the Philippines, but what isn't clear is whether any of the charities in the network ultimately paid the shipping costs to get it there.)

According to experts quoted by the *Republic*, small-scale "daisy chains" like this are common and legal. For example, one charity may receive a large donation, but without a warehouse to store it or sufficient funds to cover shipping costs, it passes on the donated goods to another charity with the necessary resources. Both charities are allowed to write off the full value of the donated goods. But it should raise flags with auditors when "daisy-chain" strategies move beyond a simple matter of one charity helping another out, and become effectively the business model, as was the case of the network of charities the *Republic* wrote about.

Lead reporter Robert Anglen began looking into bookkeeping practices at The Don Stewart Association, a Phoenix charity founded by a televangelism star, after receiving a number of tips. The association, which works on poverty and hunger campaigns, turned out to be the hub of a network that includes twenty-two charities that are connected by shared board members and family ties.

Over the three-year period analyzed by the *Republic*, the charities in the network repeatedly moved the same donated goods from one balance sheet to another, with each charity writing off the full amount. In most cases, it appears that none of the charities ever handled these donations and paid only a small percentage of the shipping costs.

Beyond the unearned tax write-offs, this bookkeeping sleight of hand helps burnish the image of the charities as efficient aid organizations—they appear to be moving a lot of goods without incurring much overhead—which in turn

brings in more money both from individual donors and the federal government. The network of charities is partially funded by the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC), an annual workplace charity drive, through which federal employees contributed \$273 million in 2007. This money is distributed among 2,300 charities that are vetted by the IRS and the CFC. Federal workers browse a CFC-approved list of charities, and choose where to donate based on an organization's mission and a snapshot of its finances.

These cash donations from individuals and federal employees can then be used to pay the salaries of charity employees, rather than to fund the handling and processing of aid. For example, the *Republic* found that of the almost \$30 million in cash the network received between 2003 and 2005, \$16.7 million of it went for "salaries and expenses."

As a result of the investigation, one of the charities in the network lost its nonprofit status in Canada. The Arizona attorney general is investigating The Don Stewart Association to ascertain what, if any, laws were broken and to determine if there is enough evidence to support a fraud case against the charity operators.

DART to *Griffin Communications* for broadcasting paid advertisements disguised as news segments without adequate disclosure. And a **LAUREL** to the *Tulsa World* for exposing the ethical breakdown. In April, *World* reporter Kim Archer wrote that Griffin Communications, which owns KOTV in Tulsa and KWTN in Oklahoma City, signed a \$3 million deal with Insure Oklahoma, a state-run insurance program, under which Griffin agreed to air promotional segments for Insure during its newscasts.

The segments are designed to look and sound like news reports, and lack clear and prominent disclosure that they are in fact paid advertisements. The anchors introduce them as traditional news pieces, closing with: "Spokesperson Angela Buckelew has more." At the end, the anchors say the segments were "sponsored by News 9's parent company, Griffin Communications LLC, and The Oklahoma Health Care Authority," which oversees Insure.

It would take a very attentive and savvy viewer to catch those vague bits of disclosure. And if such sins of omission weren't enough, Buckelew is a former reporter at KWTN, and is thus familiar to viewers in Oklahoma City as a credible source of news.

Despite Archer's story, Griffin hasn't changed the way it handles the promotions. What's at stake here isn't Insure Oklahoma's bona fides, and the segments do draw attention to the need for health insurance for employees of small businesses. But news outlets owe it to their audiences to clearly distinguish between news and paid promotion. **CJR**

One of Us

A soldier chooses journalism, but his old boss won't let go

ON WHAT I THOUGHT WAS MY LAST DAY IN THE ARMY IN MAY 2007, MY BATTALION commander gave me some parting words of discouragement. "I just want you to understand that you're leaving the most respected profession in America for one of the least," he said. It was his final attempt to dissuade me from pursuing a career in journalism.

"Roger, sir," I whispered.

The Army was in the midst of a crisis, and he was angry. Junior officers were bailing at an accelerating rate. Some were disenchanted with the deteriorating situation in Iraq; others were attracted by high-paying civilian jobs. For weeks my commander had been urging me to stay. But my mind was made up.

He shook his head and tightly crossed his arms. "If you ever happen to write about the military, just remember where you came from," he said. "Don't dishonor us." And with that, I was dismissed.

It was one of the most difficult moments of my career. I was twenty-seven and had spent my entire adult life in uniform. The thought of abandoning my unit in a time of war made me feel cowardly. But having already served two grueling tours in Iraq, I convinced myself that I'd done enough.

That evening, I boarded a plane to New York. I was headed to Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism.

People often ask me why a former Army officer wanted to be a journalist. No answer ever seems adequate. "I've just always loved writing," I'll say. Or, "The whole 'war thing' wasn't working out." The truth is more complicated. I was drawn to journalism for many of the same reasons I joined the Army. The way I see it, journalism, like the military, isn't just a profession; it's a lifestyle and an invaluable American institution from which we derive our most cherished freedoms. Journalists, like soldiers, live by a code: honesty, accuracy, and self-discipline are the touchstones of any serious reporter.

More important, I thought that journalism would give me something to believe in again. By the time I left the Army, I was mentally and emotionally broken. Disgusted with the Iraq war, I'd lost faith in the wisdom of many of my leaders and in the moral supremacy of the United States. I longed for an end to the war, more dignified treatment of returning vets, and greater civic engagement from my fellow citizens. Journalism seemed better situated than most institutions to help bring about that change. I wanted to be a part of it.

Yet my conversion from soldier to reporter was one of unrelenting conflict. I'd hoped my experience would be an asset in tackling the grave issues facing the na-

tion, but I've struggled to balance military principles—loyalty, respect, conformity—with the inherent skepticism and recalcitrance that are a reporter's trademark.

Moreover, my lingering loyalty to the Army, coupled with the subtle air of suspicion I at times encountered from fellow journalists, made it particularly difficult to define my proper relationship to the two professions. I came to believe that the core values of journalism and the military are mutually exclusive, and that to be successful at one meant renouncing the ideals of the other.

It has taken several years and a recent upheaval in my life to make me realize I was wrong.

I DIDN'T ALWAYS WANT TO BE A JOURNALIST. In fact, by the time I'd begun my final year at West Point in 2001, I was determined to serve a twenty-year career in the Army. That fall, however, the events in New York City, just fifty miles down the Hudson River, changed the course of my life.

In the weeks following the 9/11 attacks, reporters and news crews besieged the academy. Up to that point, my appreciation of the media was unsophisticated at best. As a cadet, I regularly read *The New York Times*, which was delivered to my barracks doorstep every morning courtesy of Uncle Sam. But



One man, two worlds Matt Mabe wants to help bridge the culture gap between the military and the press.

West Point's isolation and puritanical take on officer development tend, ironically, to shelter its graduates from the society they take an oath to defend.

Over the next five years, I developed a more nuanced understanding of the press, one that was heavily influenced by the media's growing antagonism toward the military. The run-up to the Iraq invasion is today widely criticized as a dark period in American journalism, when the press failed to aggressively challenge the Bush administration's pretext for war.

By early 2004, though, the administration's—and by extension the military's—honeymoon with the press was ending. Soon after completing my first tour in Iraq, headlines were dominated by detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib, the bloody urban combat in Fallujah, and deadly IEDs. Weapons of mass destruction were nowhere to be found. The

increasingly negative press coverage fomented resentment in the ranks. Soldiers were urged to avoid reporters. Journalists griped about access.

I was torn. I was proud of what my soldiers and I had accomplished in Iraq. I had witnessed the exuberant hopefulness among Iraqis who thanked us and saw a bright future ahead. But as the violence metastasized, the e-mails I received about yet another West Point classmate killed or blinded or paralyzed became more frequent. As the government seemed increasingly unable to halt the deteriorating situation and my faith in our cause eroded, I became sympathetic to the media's effort to hold someone accountable.

By 2006, I was serving my second tour of duty, this time in Ramadi, the most violent city in Iraq at one of the darkest periods of the war. Throughout 2005, as my awareness of journal-

ism's role as a watchdog was maturing, the rising danger and security costs for journalists in Iraq forced more and more news outlets to shutter their bureaus. Reporting grew perilously thin. Worse, the American public had lost its appetite for the bad news out of Iraq.

Journalists were a rare sight in Ramadi in those days. We assumed they were holed up in hotels in the Green Zone. Serving as my battalion's adjutant that summer, I handled the final affairs of our soldiers who were killed or wounded by the boiling insurgency. Every day I reduced broken bodies and shattered dreams to lines on spreadsheets and taped-up boxes awaiting shipment to next of kin. I was indignant and angry. I felt we'd been abandoned by America.

Still, I admired the few reporters who took extraordinary risks to venture out our way. I made an effort to meet

them—I wanted to know what drove these men and women. They inspired me. I decided that the next time I came to Iraq, it would be as a reporter. Less than a year later, I was in New York.

COLUMBIA WAS A FRESH START. NO uniforms, no one to salute. At first, I relished being among students from different walks of life: lawyers and businesspeople, teachers and activists, creative people with strong convictions and a range of views on every issue. Few of them, however, had any experience with the military. Most, it seemed, had never met a veteran.

Some of their notions about military culture and the conduct of the war typified the simplistic views prevalent in the mainstream media. For example, there was a perception that military service was merely a last resort for poor kids or immigrants; all veterans, some people assumed, suffered some degree of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It signaled to me that the cultural rift between the

He even delivered a mocking impersonation of one dim-witted private assigned to protect him.

These were extreme views, yet as some of my classmates laughed that evening, images of the soldiers my unit had lost swirled in my head. Brave men who had died serving a cause they believed in didn't deserve such desecration, I thought. I sought advice from a professor about how to manage the raw emotions these interactions provoked. Her response, as she later wrote in my performance evaluation, was hardly encouraging: "I would advise that Matt refrain from working in Iraq until he feels comfortable maintaining an emotional distance from his old life, so as not to impair his journalistic judgment."

Had I made a big mistake? Could anyone ever trust me to be completely neutral where the military was concerned? Could I trust myself?

After graduation in May 2008, I needed to decompress. I interned in Paris and copyedited in Russia. In

offer signaled to me for the first time that maybe I was through the worst of it. Perhaps I had rounded the corner from an earlier time when my reporting might still have been biased. I took the position without reservation.

My tenure was, unfortunately, short-lived. One evening in mid-February, a day after reporting a story about a star Marine recruiter in New Jersey, I was walking back to my apartment in Manhattan when I got a worried voicemail from my mother. I called her back immediately.

"I'm sorry," she kept repeating. "I'm just so sorry." My first thought was that someone had died.

Earlier that day, she'd received a letter from the Army ordering me back for a third combat tour. Just like that. The chance I would be reactivated during my three-year obligation in the reserves was so remote that I had honestly believed it would never happen. Yet it did, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I'd be going back to war again, this time to Afghanistan.

Whether they wield rifles or pads and pens, soldiers and journalists join their professions because they are committed to fighting for ideals that are larger than themselves.

institution I had left and the one I was joining was more hardwired than I had realized, and I increasingly found myself defending the military against stereotypes.

As the semester progressed, I felt a creeping sense of isolation. I had my own criticisms about the failed strategy that plunged Iraq into chaos, but I was resentful of the hostility from prominent panelists and lecturers at the school that year. One evening, an award-winning photographer presented work he'd done in Iraq to my war correspondence class. During his talk, he ridiculed the hapless officers and scheming NCOs he'd dealt with on his various embeds, caricaturing them with tired labels and silly voices.

both places, talk of America's endless wars was mostly absent. The months-long interlude gave me time to develop my craft uninfluenced by politics back home. I got used to the rhythm of a newsroom, the pressure of a deadline. I'd been out of the Army for a year and a half, and I felt more and more detached from my old life. My earlier goal of covering the military seemed less likely. I rarely mentioned my military service to strangers.

In December, I returned to the United States to take my first reporting job at *The Star-Ledger* in Newark, New Jersey. I was surprised when, after only a few weeks on the job, my editor offered me the chance to cover the military. The

AS I WRITE, MY DEPLOYMENT IS DAYS away. The last few weeks shuttling between training bases in South Carolina, Missouri, and Mississippi have given me time to contemplate my transformation from soldier to reporter and back again.

What I've discovered is something people like my battalion commander back in 2007 would do well to understand: in America, journalism and the military are more akin than members of either profession appreciate. Whether they wield rifles or pads and pens, soldiers and journalists join their professions because they are committed to fighting for an ideal larger than themselves, be it freedom or truth or justice.

I've come to see this new assignment as the best chance I may ever have to help close the gap between the two cultures. I believed once that my experience as a soldier would enhance my contribution to journalism. I'd like to think that it has. All I can hope now is that the reverse will also be true. **CJR**

MATT MABE is an Army captain currently serving in eastern Afghanistan. He is scheduled to return home in May 2010.

Groundhog Day

Why this year's health-care debate sounds like the one in 1993

LAST FALL, SOON AFTER BARACK OBAMA WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT, SHEILA Burke was waiting to discuss Obama's campaign promises, via Webcast, with students specializing in health reporting at the City University of New York's Graduate School of Journalism. Burke, a health-policy expert who now teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School, laid a spreadsheet on the table and whispered to another guest. "See," she said, "we had all these provisions before," and ticked off the similarities between the current effort to pass health-care reform and those in the past. Burke declined to show me the document, saying that it was proprietary and belonged to former Senator George Mitchell, the Senate majority leader during the Clinton-era reform effort.

But whether Mitchell, Burke (who was Senator Bob Dole's chief of staff during the 1993 debate), or any of the other health-care heavies from the old days want the *déjà vu* reality of reform, circa 2009, made public, it has become dismayingly clear that that is exactly what is happening, despite abundant rhetoric to the contrary. "The idea that we've made a great breakthrough just isn't so," says Jonathan Oberlander, a health-policy expert at the University of North Carolina. "Most of the plans today are direct descendants of what was proposed for the '93-'94 debate. The debate reminds me of one of my favorite movies, *Groundhog Day*."

With few exceptions, like the fine series last summer by NPR that explained how a number of other countries handle health care, the press has done little to challenge this reality or help to broaden the health-care debate. Rather, it has mostly passed along the pronouncements of politicians and the major stakeholders who have the most to lose from wholesale reform. By not challenging the status quo, the press has so far foreclosed a vibrant discussion of the full range of options, and also has not dug deeply into the few that *are* being discussed, thereby leaving citizens largely uninformed about an issue that will affect us all.

The consequences of the failure to have a robust debate are likely to be even greater than they were sixteen years ago. In 2009, the government projects, the cost of medical care will consume 17.6 percent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product, compared to 13.7 percent in 1994; the number of people without insurance is projected to hit 52 million next year, up from 37 million in the early nineties. A new report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation indicates that the number of uninsured could grow to more than 65 million in the next ten years, and that business health costs could double. These numbers suggest the need for drastic measures. But the politically acceptable solutions do not involve radical restructuring. Instead, they build on an existing foundation that relies mostly on for-

profit commercial insurers to provide the coverage and for employers to pay for it. The word "universal" has come to mean covering more people with private insurance, not a national health system where every citizen is entitled to medical care and pays taxes to support it.

Absent from the debate are not only single-payer systems like the ones in England and Canada, but other systems with multiple payers, like ones in Germany and Japan—or, for that matter, any discussion of why a system that relies on competition among private insurers in The Netherlands hasn't resulted in lower prices for consumers, as advocates claimed. What's common to all these systems is that everyone is entitled to health care and pays taxes to support the system, and medical costs are controlled by limits on spending. The specter of a system that takes a significant bite out of stakeholder profits in the U.S. is the real reason the debate is so restricted.

Reform efforts have danced around this impasse for decades. In the early 1990s, for instance, health experts promoted a pay-or-play scheme—an arrangement in which employers would be required to either offer their workers health insurance or pay into a fund to subsidize those who had none. There was also serious talk of an "individual mandate"—a requirement that everyone have insurance—and of making workers pay taxes on health benefits from their employers. (Both proposals are now on the short list.) Experts in the earlier debate also pitched a public plan under which people not covered by their employer would be enrolled in a government plan. The Clintons did not embrace that idea, but President Obama supports it. Early on in their respective campaigns, both Bill Clinton and Obama rejected the idea of single-payer, code for national health insurance. Indeed, single-payer is further off the table than ever despite enclaves of noisy advocates who have been virtually shut out of the political process.

Then, as now, there were outside conveners trying to influence political and public opinion. In the Clinton days, it was the Jackson Hole group—businessmen, insurance executives, and academics who met in a Wyoming lodge to hatch proposals for managed compe-

tition. Today it's the Herndon Alliance, which includes former single-payer supporters, advocacy groups, unions, and think tanks that have rediscovered the public-plan option and fashioned language to sell it. They've taken their cues from Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, who found in a study paid for by the alliance that Americans were happy with their private coverage and would resist a Medicare-for-all solution. Doing what Frank Luntz has done for Republicans, Lake invented new buzz words—"quality, affordable health care"—and counseled Democrats to pair them with reassurances to the middle class that they could keep the coverage they had. Alliance partners have enforced the kind of language discipline that would make a Republican proud. Almost every statement about health care from a politician or advocacy group uses the words "quality" and "affordable."

Exactly why the press is reprising its docile approach to this debate is a complicated issue that necessarily involves the long-standing question of how journalists define their role in society—whether they are leaders of the national conversation or mere amplifiers of it. In 1993, Holly Taylor, a health reporter at *The Berkshire Eagle*, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, stood up at the annual meeting of Investigative Reporters and Editors and asked why the national media were reporting that managed competition was the only solution to the health-care crisis. Taylor told me at the time: "What I found frustrating was that everyone was writing about managed competition as if it were a *fait accompli*." This year, it's the same story. At the annual meeting of the Association of Health Care Journalists, Duane Schrag, a reporter at the *Salina Journal* in Salina, Kansas, echoed Taylor's frustration after listening to a talk about health-care reform by Oregon Senator Ron Wyden. "I was just struck by how accepting the audience was of a solution that represents an encapsulation of the status quo with the same players and the same current costs," Schrag says. Why, I asked him, did he think journalists weren't pushing back? "Perhaps the media were caught up in the good news that after sixty years there's a breakthrough and all the stars are aligned," he says.

Schrag's observation is astute. It isn't just that the debate is the same and the press isn't acknowledging it—the coverage actually suggests that things are different. NOT YESTERDAY'S HEALTH FIGHT, read the headline on an April column by *The Washington Post's* E. J. Dionne. Robert Laszewski, who writes a popular blog called Health Care Policy and Marketplace Review, told me reporters keep telling him, "Bob, it's different this time." And I say, "No, it's not really different." As Schrag suggests, the media's master narrative tells us that the debate is different because, unlike in the Clinton era, all the stakeholders are playing well together. Insurers, especially, are more cooperative, supporting coverage for everyone and agreeing to give up medical underwriting, a practice that has denied coverage to people at higher risk for health problems. "The health in-

The press is again covering the process of reform, not the substance.

surance industry is working on a transformation that could come right out of *Extreme Makeover*," wrote AP reporter Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar in March. In December 2008, a *Boston Globe* headline proclaimed: LOBBIES BACKING HEALTH REFORMS, INSURERS CHANGE THEIR TUNE FROM 1993-94 DEBATE.

But look at what *The New York Times* had to say in December 1992: IN SHIFT, INSURERS ASK U.S. TO REQUIRE COVERAGE FOR ALL, read the headline on a story in which reporter Robert Pear quoted Judith Feder, a Clinton transition team official, who described the apparent support for universal coverage and cost containment "as a major turnaround" for the industry.

It's true that in early 1993, many of the same stakeholders—insurers, employers, and the American Medical Association—were supportive of comprehensive reform. Only when they realized what the

Clinton plan required—spending limits, stricter regulation, a mandate that businesses provide coverage to employees, etc.—did they sour on it. Only then did the insurance industry unleash its infamous Harry and Louise ads that were so effective at turning public opinion against the legislation. A similar broad consensus exists now, but the press has misread it, argues Harvard pollster Robert Blendon. He says that "reporters covering Washington believe that the debate is over."

One thing that is different this time is the Obama administration's strategy. Instead of delivering a specific plan, the president outlined eight lofty principles—including the goal of universal coverage and making coverage affordable—and is leaving it to Congress to fill in the blanks. (By mid-June, there were signs that Obama had decided to assume more of a leadership role in the debate.) The press has reported this strategy as Obama learning from the Clintons' mistakes. But this frame misses a larger point: the lack of concrete legislation to be picked over and explained—coupled with an accelerated timetable for action set by congressional leaders and the president and the dominance of rhetoric about how the "stars are aligned" for reform—have so far precluded a thorough debate.

As in the early nineties, the press is covering the process of reform, not the substance. Stories have yet to explore the consequences of an individual mandate, which some key members of Congress have proposed, and have dismissed it as though it were not controversial—which it certainly will be. Journalists have not explained how a public plan might work and who might be eligible—despite the hype, it's unlikely everyone will be. They have not questioned the cost-containment measures the administration and Congress are promoting. Although Obama has talked a lot about lowering the cost of health care, cost-containment measures with teeth—like global budgets and spending caps—are nowhere in sight. There is not ample evidence to support the claim that health-information technology, preventive care, and disease management—the centerpieces of Obama's cost-containment strategy—save much money, but the press coverage has managed to convey the impres-

sion that they would. Louise Russell, a Rutgers research professor and a leading scholar on preventive care, has written extensively that preventive care actually costs money, rather than saves it. Academics know her work, but the press has either ignored it or simply not discovered it. Instead, reporters go to the same sources over and over for more quotable conventional wisdom.

Since the beginning of the presidential campaign, I have found scant coverage of how real people would fare under the kind of reform envisioned by the health-care cognoscenti. In fairness, until June there was no bill to measure. But we have known enough about what was coming that it should have prompted some reporting along these lines. What will happen, for instance, to the owner of a South Bronx taco restaurant who finds he must pay thousands of dollars for insurance or face severe penalties for not being insured? Or to the factory worker who must pay taxes on her health insurance, just as her employer makes her pay more for fewer benefits?

In the fall of 1993, I wrote in *CJR*: "So far, neither the press nor the Clintons have built a consensus among the people who have to use whatever system Washington rebuilds." The same is true today. Neither Obama nor the press have built a consensus for reform. It's hard to assemble one when the public doesn't know what reform actually means. An engineering doctoral student from the University of California at Berkeley and a Manhattan hairdresser recently asked me the same question: What is single-payer? And last spring, my journalism students at CUNY asked people on the streets of New York what they knew about the differences between a public-plan option and private insurance. "I didn't know there is a difference," one said. Another added: "Public, everybody knows about it; private, nobody does."

President Obama says he wants a bill by October, so the press still has a chance to help the rest of us make sense of these crucial policy decisions. But they will have to do it quickly. It really is Groundhog Day for health-care reform. **CJR**

TRUDY LIEBERMAN is a contributing editor. She writes regularly about the coverage of health care for *CJR.org*.

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THE AMERICAN NEWSROOM SEAN HEMMERLE



The Smoking Gun

New York, NY
February 2, 2009







JOURNALISTS TEND TO MOVE IN PACKS. NOT LONG ago we thought that the key to the business model of the new era was traffic. Journalism would migrate slowly from paid print content to free Web content—information wants to be free and all—and we would support our expensive newsrooms with the Internet ads that would ride in, bugles blowing, as thousands of visitors came to our sites. More recently came the realization, heightened by a savage recession, that the cavalry is inadequate.

So now what? In this cover package, we set four writers on the problem. Alissa Quart looks at the history of the free culture/free content movement and what it has wrought. Peter Osnos probes the link economy, asking what's fair in the age of Google. David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, argues that what will save newsgathering is the courage to erect a paywall and take a stand behind it. And Michael Shapiro makes the case for a hybrid, a savvy mix of free and paid content that, combined with other income, could save the day—if we first rethink what we're offering. What's clear is that the free lunch is gone, and hard choices are waiting. →



Expensive Gifts

What does free culture cost?

BY ALISSA QUART

One evening in February 2009, the artist Shepard Fairey spoke at the New York Public Library. He was discussing his famous silkscreen poster *Hope*, which bore Barack Obama's face, shadowed by swirling red and blue patterns. At the event, Fairey sat with legs akimbo, artfully slouched before the gilded, packed room, still retaining his old skate-punk persona. Speaking in a skater's staccato pidgin, he said he was "stoked" about the

poster and had "diligently perpetuated" the image on his own dime, putting it up on Facebook and MySpace and e-mailing it far and wide.

Fairey had been an haute graffiti artist for two decades. He borrowed from existing images in order to create silkscreens that mocked American corporate culture or extolled rock stars. He plastered these images across cities and towns, in what could be called anti-advertising advertising campaigns, testing the boundary between thievery and homage. All in all, he was pretty appealing, with his tufts of hair, drolly subversive demeanor, and images-must-be-free stance. I found myself nodding along as he spoke that night, in discussion with that chic legal scholar Lawrence Lessig, a founding father of "free culture." Free culture has a long history, but simply put, it's an ideology that argues for finding a more balanced copyright law, one under which listeners and readers have as much legal protection as publishers and authors. It is

based on an economy of giving: people freely distributing their work and allowing it to be augmented. In return, the givers get knowledge that their work is being creatively used and absorbed by many people. The most extreme entirely reject intellectual property, but most simply want copyright to be less restrictive. As Jay Rosen, an associate professor at New York University's journalism department, put it, by sharing one's work, "you gain not lose. That's what Wikipedia is based on. This philosophy starts in the same place that journalism starts."

Fairey wasn't onstage just because he was cool: he was a literal poster child for appropriation. A month or so before the event, The Associated Press had accused him publicly of copying one of its photographs, without payment or permission. In response, Fairey sued the AP. He argued that he had used freelancer Mannie Garcia's photograph, which Garcia sold to the AP, "as a visual reference for a highly transformative purpose." He sought a court order that would say his Obama image didn't violate AP's copyright. Fairey claimed his work was covered under the fair use exception to the copyright statute. Among other things, fair use allows for the use of preexisting content and images, as long as the new work is a true alteration of the original.

At the library that evening in February, Fairey presented himself as the innocent provocateur—that familiar art-world paradox that is somewhere south of the wise fool—who had been unfairly attacked by a media titan. In Fairey's drama, the AP was the heavy and he the defiant "little guy." As Fairey spoke that night, though, reality began to set in. He had appropriated the image of an even littler guy, a freelance photographer, without even finding out who he was, let alone acknowledging his work. And the AP was striking back not because it was simply censorious, but because it had watched, hapless, like so many financially stressed news entities, as its content was siphoned off on the Web. And although Fairey cited fair use, the line between fair use and infringement can be foggy. Under fair use, one person's work can be used by another person or organization, but only in certain contexts—in criticism, for example, when a reviewer quotes from a book or uses an image to illustrate a point. But it's not clearly quantified: How many lines of text? Unknown. How much of a photo can be reused? Not sure.

Because the world is changing, and the world of journalism in particular is transforming, Fairey automatically

became part of another story, one provocation among many copyright issues that are bedeviling journalism. Fairey's case also showed me most clearly that "payment" for the use of journalistic or creative works is not just about the money anymore, at least for independent writers and artists.

It's about money and a parallel currency that may be as valuable to some as money: attribution by name, or even collaborative attribution. These should be the new rules for photojournalism and journalism per se in the age of appropriation. In the new world of "ethical" use, couldn't Shepard Fairey's Obama image have had the credit "Photo illustration by Mannie Garcia and Shepard Fairey" from the beginning?

Yet for the AP and the rest of the legacy media, attribution doesn't solve much. For anyone who cherishes the hide-bound institutions of journalism and the original reporting and writing on which they are built, the eager technologists and crowd-sorcerers are living on fumes. No one knows, the old schoolers say, how well or badly this new world of open, populist, and participatory culture will actually play out. And they worry that free culture is helping to kill off flawed but essential institutions.

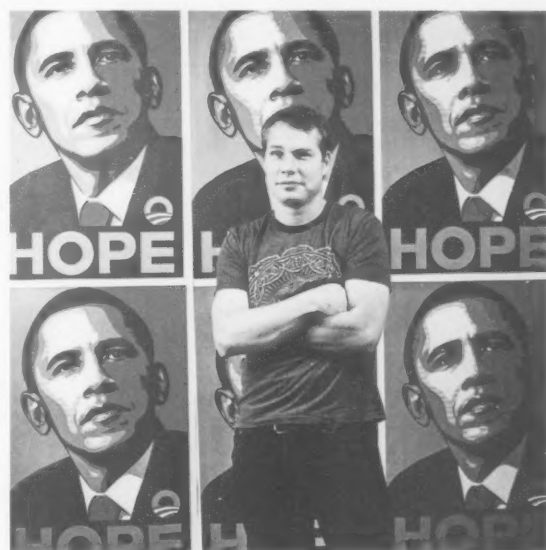
THE FAIREY BROUHAHA DIDN'T HAPPEN IN A VACUUM. THE last decade or so has seen a rise in the ideas of free culture. We know how free culture is being defined these days, and how it sometimes collides with copyright claims. But where does the original idea for it come from? The intellectual enshrinement of the idea of the gift—something given by one party to another with no direct repayment—has a longer history than this. I see a link between today's free culturists and twentieth-century anthropologist Marcel Mauss, who argues in his book, *The Gift*, that gifts are never "free" but rather are a kind of social magic, as they give rise to reciprocal exchange and tie the giver to the receiver. According to Mauss, social solidarity is created by a warp and woof of gifts both given and received.

Much later, a quarter of a century ago, Lewis Hyde published his book, also titled *The Gift*, an ur-text that sits on the shelves at Harvard College and in the tents of Burning Man. In it, Hyde argues that there are aspects of life that are not best organized by a marketplace of currency exchange—artistic practice, customs of birth and death and relationships, and teachers' gifts of knowledge. Hyde was primarily writing about "the gift" in the context of literature and folk culture, but the notion flows into other contexts as well.

Around the same time that Hyde's *Gift* was published, some people started thinking about how the gift economy, and the exchange of ideas and the building of reputation and name rather than capital, related to software. These were people like Richard Stallman, the founder of Gnu, now President of the Free Software Foundation, who has long believed that it was improper to refuse to share information with someone who needs it. Stallman famously said that free culture means free as in "free speech," not "free beer."

Originally, the ideology of free culture, and its more sedate policy-oriented sibling, progressive copyright law, were a way of protecting imaginative citizens from the dauphins of Dis-

ney and the mammoth record labels and the like, who would not let artists and writers and citizens employ the dauphins' images or songs in their art or commerce. Free culture was meant as a check on the excessive capitalist zeal of entertainment conglomerates that would otherwise lock up all their daughters, from Jane Austen to Snow White. The term was originally the title of a 2004 book by Lawrence Lessig, but it came to stand in for other movements as well—hacker computing, the access-to-knowledge movement, and the "copyleft" movement, among others.



Whose image is this? Shepard Fairey's Obama silkscreen made him a poster child for the appropriation of others' work.

Legal scholars like Lessig broke ground with their arguments for looser, "progressive" copyright law, writing books and targeting some of these corporate interests. The Creative Commons was founded, a nonprofit organization that worked to increase the body of work that is available to the public for "free and legal sharing and use." The Creative Commons began offering what are called CC licenses: licenses that allow others to copy and distribute a person's work provided the copiers give the originator credit. Creative Commons licenses are intended for those who don't want to depend on fair use, says the CC's Fred Benenson. (Wikimedia is soon to adopt CC licenses for its collectively created property.)

But the institutions dominating the copyright debate are different than they were in even the recent past. The tide has turned. Free culture once defended culture producers against corporations. Now, free culture may well threaten the small culture-producers themselves. That's because so many people produce their own intellectual property, often unaffiliated with institutions and corporations, that these "little guys"—freelancers like Mannie Garcia—are the ones being appropriated from.



Free culture has also become a more pertinent term within journalism. Clay Shirky, a scholar at NYU, wrote about it recently in an adept essay on the future of media. He asserted that it was the “real world” of media, printed on paper and bought and sold, that had become sci-fi. “Revolutions create a curious inversion of perception,” he wrote. “Inside the papers, the pragmatists were the ones simply looking out the window and noticing that the real world was increasingly resembling the unthinkable scenario.” In Shirky’s essay, some of the technologically-enabled media types like himself wonder out loud how things would be different if old-school newspapers and newsmagazines were financially healthy. Would they bother sniping at free culture? They suggest that these journalists and others fail to understand that free culture isn’t the thing that is killing them: the market is. The old-school types were only imagining that the devils of recession, cheap Web ads, and Craigslist are the fault of free culture. Fred Benenson scowled at the AP, saying it was a “copyright bully” that is “hurting its own brand” by going after Fairey.

On the other side, the AP appeared to be positioning itself as the punisher, lobbying for payment from aggregators of original content, setting its sights on Fairey and then Google for aggregating AP content on Google News. The AP also threatened a “news blackout”—meaning that if Google didn’t strike a fair deal with the AP, Google would not get AP copy. The AP would also try to redirect users away from secondary sources that post the AP’s original content. In the mosh pit of punditry, old-school journalists started lashing out at what they see as “freeloading” Web types, their arguments falling like so many angry emoticons. Michael Moran, for instance, who runs the Council on Foreign Relations’s Web site, recently vented in *The Nation* about “Internet thinkers like Clay Shirky and Jay Rosen, who have elevated the ethos of free information to unreasonable heights.”

Who’s right? And why couldn’t they come together to find a new way to support journalists? Could requisite attribution be part of the solution? Attribution might be—here’s a wonderfully icky word—monetizable for individuals, especially the growing number of freelancers producing original content, and thus it is significant. The beleaguered newspapers and The Associated Press are not looking for attribution but for money to support their newsrooms. Content given away for free undermines their ability to survive, as they see it. On the other hand, there is so much to be said for free access to materials that we can use in our writing and in our images. After all, in order to write this, I am benefiting from free sources—published newspapers that are available online. And yes, my own work can be found at alissaquart.com (feel free to visit after reading this!).

I WENT TO BOSTON’S INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART to see the museum’s giant Shepard Fairey retrospective and get a closer look at the image that has become the emblem of these debates. Walking through the show, on the way to Hope: The Poster, I passed dozens of Fairey’s silkscreens.

Most were from images appropriated from newspapers or album covers. Some were beautiful. Others were pedantic, charismatic, or fanboy absurd. Almost all contained Fairey’s favorite legend, “Obey,” although the irony of the word wasn’t always clear. Who were we to obey? Fairey? I couldn’t help but remember some of the cease-and-desist letters Fairey has sent to artists who had done their own remixes of the original images. Some of the images looked like advertisements, and in fact were ads... for Shepard Fairey.

The Obama silkscreen was somewhere at the show’s center. Walking up to it, I could see it was majestic—a marked transformation of the original. But seeing the poster only underscored how the traditional battle over copyright, in which the citizen was up against the corporation, has changed. In today’s world, Fairey may be an artist, but he is also something of a corporation, and he is up against another corporation, the AP. The person left out initially was the creator of the original image, Garcia, who made it in April 2006 while on assignment for the AP. While the AP believes it deserves credit and compensation, Garcia thinks that he owns the photo’s copyright. In this case, money is no longer the absolute end point: Fairey profited economically and in terms of his reputation from his name “being out there.” And from the start, Garcia would have been “out there” as well if Fairey had added his name to the work. Indeed, Garcia did profit from the image once his name got out; he earned thousands of dollars when his photographs were sold in 2009, after being exhibited at the National Gallery and a private gallery.

Obligatory attribution could easily be written into copyright law, argues Greg Lastowka, a legal scholar who is a visiting professor and specialist in intellectual property at Columbia Law School. Lastowka and others say that at the least, writers, journalists, and artists could be paid in “attribution currency.” Today, some journalists and photojournalists are dependent on their names more than their institutional affiliations—credit-by-name is the coin of the realm. “Now, journalists should build a career on an icon or an image, by being appropriated as much as appropriating,” Michael Heller, a professor at Columbia Law School and author of *The Gridlock Economy*, told me.

And finally, what are we to make of that other persuasive and idealistic argument for “the gift” in culture—that an open flow produces more innovations and greater enlightenment? It’s a profound concept. But there’s been a certain lack of reciprocity in some quarters of contemporary culture, including journalism. These days, many of the professional journalists and photographers who give away their work feel that they don’t receive enough in exchange, at least not yet. With proper attribution, the culture of the gift will and can help the smaller journalists. The gift economy, though, probably won’t help the AP and the big media companies much. And as always, a gift freely given is one thing, but a gift that is *taken* is another. **CJR**

ALISSA QUART, a columnist for *CJR*, is working on a book about changes in alternative culture. She is a recipient of a 2009–2010 Nieman fellowship and the author of *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*.

What's a Fair Share In the Age of Google?

How to think about news in the link economy

BY PETER OSNOS

The buzz inside Google is overwhelmingly positive about what the company does and how we will all benefit from the results—including the embattled denizens of newspapers and magazines who increasingly see Google as an enabler of their demise. Barely a decade ago, Google received its first \$25 million investment, based on search technology developed by Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the company's cofounders. By the time

it went public just five years later, "Google" was a verb. Today it is the dominant force in what has turned out to be the central organizing principle of the Internet's impact on our lives: the search function and the accompanying links, keywords, and advertising that make sense and commerce out of the vast universe of information and entertainment on the Web. Google is as important today as were Microsoft, IBM, and the original AT&T, linchpins of our culture and economy, in the development of modern computation and communications.

By contrast, the great twentieth-century print companies, such as Time Inc., Tribune, and The New York Times Company, are in a battle for survival, or at least reinvention, against considerable odds. Google has become a kind of metaphor for the link economy and the Internet's immense power to organize content. Yet as the global leader among Web-based enterprises, it has also become a subject of debate and controversy, even though its sense of itself is still as benign

as the playful tenor of its Manhattan offices, where the fittings include scooters for zipping around the halls and a lavish free cafeteria.

At lunch there, I was surrounded by an animated crowd that included Brin, Google's thirty-six-year-old cofounder, wearing jeans, a sweater, and a demeanor indistinguishable from the rest of his eager young crew. Google maintains that it is actively working to make journalism and literature truly democratic and, functionally, easier to do. Google's "Office of Content Partnerships" sent me a list of "free tools journalists could use today for nearly every aspect of their work," including Blogger, a platform for publishing online; Google Analytics, for measuring Web traffic; Google Web site Optimizer; and other tools. The publishers of newspapers, magazines, and books, recognize that Google and the link-referral service it represents have become inextricable from their audiences' lives, and indispensable to reaching that audience in large numbers.

And yet there is a growing sense among the "legacy" media, at least, that Google facilitates a corrosive move away from paying content providers for their work. Proceeds go instead to those who sell advertising and other services while aggregating and/or lifting material they did not create. It is true that the content providers have submitted to the link economy of their own accord. Still, in a piece last winter, I wrote that the notion that "information wants to be free" is absurd when the referral mechanism makes a fortune and the creators

get scraps. That position was excoriated by some bloggers, including one who, in a quote cited on *The New York Times's* Opinionator blog, called it "sheer idiocy."

Maybe. But only two months later, the Associated Press (clearly acting on behalf of the news organizations that own it) made a similar point and initiated a process that could end in lawsuits. Addressing the Newspaper Association of America, the chairman of the AP's board of directors, William Dean Singleton, CEO of MediaNews, said: "We can no longer stand by and watch others walk off with our work under misguided legal theories."

The full quote from which "information wants to be free" was lifted, by the way, is more ambiguous and complicated than that widely-quoted excerpt. The line comes from the futurist Stewart Brand, who first said it at a programmer's convention in 1984 and elaborated in his book, *The Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*, in 1987, where he wrote:



Information Wants To Be Free. Information also wants to be expensive. Information wants to be free because it has become so cheap to distribute, copy, and recombine—too cheap to meter. It wants to be expensive because it can be immeasurably valuable to the recipient. That tension will not go away. It leads to endless wrenching debate about price, copyright, 'intellectual property,' the moral rightness of casual distribution, because each round of new devices makes the tension worse, not better.

Brand leaves out another factor—that valuable information is expensive to produce. But two decades later, the battles he foresaw are fully engaged.

AN ECOSYSTEM IN WHICH ALL STAKEHOLDERS IN THE content economy have a fair share. That is one media executive's succinct summary of what is necessary to redress the growing imbalance of power and resources between traditional content creators and those who provide links to or aggregate that material. But the effort to find that formula is complicated because it involves technologies upgrading at warp speed, sweeping changes in popular habits, collapsing and emerging business models, and one of the basic pillars of our democracy—what we have always called a free press.

As this century began, newspapers, especially those in metro areas with dominant positions, were reporting profits of 20, 30, and even 40 percent. *The New York Times* was selling over a billion dollars a year in advertising and *Time* magazine held its seventy-fifth-anniversary gala celebration at Radio City Music Hall, which had been specially redone for the occasion. Fortunes disappeared in the tech bust of 2000-01, which seemed to underscore the fact that Internet-based commerce was in its formative stages. The news products on the Web—CompuServe, Prodigy, and America Online—seemed, on the whole, complementary to newspapers and magazines rather than competitive against them.

Yet the unlimited expanse that the Internet provides and the amazing capacity of Google (and Yahoo and MSN, etc.) to search it, soon began to change everything. Vending services like eBay and Craigslist flourished; sensations like MySpace and YouTube, where users provide the content, were born at the intersection of creativity and engineering; audiences were suddenly huge for essentially brand-new Web news providers online, such as MSNBC and CNN. Sites like The Drudge Report showed the potential of aggregation and, later, The Huffington Post showed the potential for garnering large crowds partly by recycling material created elsewhere.

Significantly, most of the established news organizations reached the same conclusion about how to take advantage of what was happening on the Web. They went for the model that had supported network television for decades—mass audiences attracted by free access that would justify high advertising rates. Virtually overnight, Google et al were delivering hundreds of millions of readers to media companies which, in turn, believed they could monetize those visitors.

This approach contrasted with the one adopted in the 1980s by the emerging cable systems for television. Those

companies negotiated subscription fees with the providers of their most popular programming, such as ESPN and dozens of other channels, including some that carried news. (The average cable subscriber, for example, pays 77 cents per month for Fox News, whether they watch it or not.) Most cable networks also have copious advertising, from inexpensive pitches for local establishments to national campaigns. This flow of subscription revenues, combined with advertising, made cable programming a lucrative business—which, ironically, resembles the way newspapers and magazines operated until they unilaterally decided they were better off giving content away. (There are differences, of course, especially since barriers to a cable system are high, while barriers to launching on the Web are low, even though moguls like Barry Diller at The Daily Beast and others have found themselves investing real money there to get started.)

As the scale of the global economic implosion became clear, accelerating negative trends in circulation and advertising already under way, it became increasingly obvious that the free-content model was not working. News audiences were huge. On September 29, 2008, the day the Bush administration's first bailout proposal was voted down by the House of Representatives and the Dow fell almost eight hundred points, *nytimes.com* had 10 million visitors and 42.7 million page views. But revenues for The New York Times Company were disappearing so fast that this respected gatherer of news had to beg and borrow just to meet its debt obligations and maintain its news operation while also sustaining morale for the myriad innovations necessary to stay extant. This spring it threatened to shut down *The Boston Globe*, another financially sick newspaper with healthy traffic on its Web site. Unless new ways of attracting and sharing revenue are devised with the same breathtaking speed with which they have disappeared, the gathering of news by reputable, experienced institutions that are cornerstones of their community and the nation will be irreversibly damaged.

Print journalism bought into the free-news online model. Still, it is hardly surprising that the winners in the transformation of news dissemination, the distributors and aggregators, would become the focus of grievances by those they have trounced, willfully or not. So what is to be done to manage the consequences of this inexorable transformation of news delivery? If there is a simple, all-encompassing answer to that question, I did not find it in discussions with practitioners and pundits on all sides of the problem. But in the haze, I did find a tripartite framework for understanding the major aspects of the issue—let's call them the doctrines of Fair Conduct, Fair Use, and Fair Compensation.

Fair Conduct

On Saturday afternoon, February 7, 2009, SI.com, the Web site of *Sports Illustrated*, broke a huge story: Alex Rodriguez, the mega-rich Yankees star, had taken performance-enhancing drugs while playing for the Texas Rangers. *Sports Illustrated* released the story on its Web site rather than in the magazine, according to the editors involved, in an effort to enhance SI.com's standing as a destination



A-Rod Agonistes *Sports Illustrated* broke the Alex Rodriguez steroid story, but The Huffington Post got the initial traffic.

for fans increasingly conditioned to getting sports news online. Within hours the story was everywhere, but if you went through Google to find it, what you likely got instead were the pickups that appeared elsewhere, summaries or even rewrites, with attribution. Most galling was that The Huffington Post's use of an Associated Press version of *SI*'s report was initially tops on Google, which meant that it, and not *SI.com*, tended to be the place readers clicking through to get the gist of the breaking scandal would land.

Traffic on *SI.com* did go up on that Saturday and for days thereafter, but not nearly as much as the editors had projected. As long as the value of advertising on the Web is measured by the number of visitors a site receives, driving those numbers is critical, and therein lies the dilemma. Why did The Huffington Post come up ahead of *SI.com*? Because, even Google insiders concede, Huffington is effective at implementing search optimization techniques, which means that its manipulation of keywords, search terms, and the dynamics of Web protocol give it an advantage over others scrambling to be the place readers are sent by search engines. What angered the people at *Sports Illustrated* and Time Inc. is that Google, acting as traffic conductor, seemed unmoved by their grievance over what had happened to their ownership of the story. An *SI* editor quoted to me Time Inc.'s editor-in-chief, John Huey, noting crisply that, "talking to Google is like trying to talk to a television."

The rules of the road for distributing traffic on the Internet need to include recognition, in simple terms, of who got the

story. The algorithm needs human help; otherwise, valuable traffic goes to sites that didn't pay to create the content.

Fair Use

This has to do with how content is gathered, displayed, and monetized by aggregators, not how it is found and distributed. Fair use is a technical term for the standards one must meet in order to use copyrighted material without the permission of rights holders, as in excerpts, snippets, or reviews, and it turns out to be far more flexible than I long had thought. U.S. copyright law sets four main factors to consider in determining what is fair use: whether the quotation of the material is for commercial gain, the nature and scale of the work, the amount being used in relation to the whole, and the impact on the value of the material by its secondary use.

The definition of fair use was central in the lengthy negotiations among book publishers, the Authors Guild, and Google to settle litigation over Google's intention to digitize copyrighted books for search and distribution without paying for them. At the outset, in 2006, Google apparently believed that releasing only "snippets" of the books meant it would prevail in a court test. The publishers and authors argued that once Google had unrestricted access to the content, it would inevitably be widely used in full or large part.

Ultimately, the sides decided not to force the matter to resolution. Instead, in October 2008, Google agreed to pay \$125 million to the plaintiffs and to establish a system to pay



copyright holder, share advertising revenues that may result, and build a registry for all books that are available.

The book agreement—actually the settlement of several lawsuits—is nearly 150 pages, plus attachments, of excruciatingly complex detail. Debate over the terms ever since they were announced has been fierce and the court has already postponed final comments from interested parties until October 7. He will then look at the criticisms put forward by, among others, the Harvard librarian and lawyers funded by Microsoft who contend that Google is gaining what amounts to a monopoly in the digital book arena. Then, the judge will determine whether to approve the agreement as is, or send it back for further negotiations to satisfy the objections of its critics. He cannot amend the terms himself.

How the logic of publisher-author-Google pact applies to the news business is not clear—except that Google has acknowledged that the right to scan and distribute information has value, which can be shared with the originators of that content. Google's licensing agreement with the AP and other wire services—in which it publishes some AP content on its own servers rather than merely linking to it—may be another illustration of the same idea: pay to play.

But what of the aggregation of links? The Google position is that a link with a sentence or two as a tease is fair use of the material, and the site that generated the content actually is a beneficiary of the traffic. With news, the argument becomes entangled in whether the aggregation enhances or detracts from the value of the original content, and also in determining what amounts to fair use when an aggregator surrounds those links with its own summaries, blogs, and other interpretative embellishments, as some aggregators do. The news organizations also argue that aggregators should pay for that right to aggregate when they sell advertising around the links and snippets.

It would take a mind-bending interpretation of fair use to work these issues out, especially if the case went to trial. Many news providers don't have the time that a case would take (years, probably). And Google, again, may not want to force a final determination of the matter, as in the books case. As the controversy over Google's role in news intensified in the spring, executives from The New York Times Company, The Washington Post Company, and presumably others, met with Google in search of formulas that might balance their respective interests. Every one involved has signed nondisclosure agreements. If progress has been made in these discussions, it has not become public.

Fair Compensation

All of this still leaves the considerable question of monetizing the reading of material on the free-to-access sites that newspapers and magazines offer, now that it seems that online advertising alone will not be enough to support those operations. There are many ideas around for micropayments or subscriptions, memberships or paid sections within a free site, out of which may come a viable business solution or

solutions. Based on my own reporting, the answer could be in some combination of individual payments or cable and telephone fees. Americans routinely pay telecom providers (Verizon, Optimum, and AT&T are the ones in my house) to deliver information and entertainment by television, computer, and wireless devices. The goal would be to extend those payments to the originators of news content. Google, it seems to me, might serve as a kind of meter, helping determine what percentage should go to the content originators. Complicated? Yes, but that is the kind of challenge that computers and the engineers who master them are meant to meet.

One of the best statements on this subject came from Jonathan Rosenberg, president for product management at Google, who wrote on a company blog, "We need to make it easier for the experts, journalists, and editors that we actually trust to publish their work under an authorship model that is authenticated and extensible, and then to monetize it in a meaningful way." The book publishers and authors agree with Google recognized that goal, acknowledging that all information is not equal and cannot be free and endure.

THESE FAIRNESS GOALS FOR THE INTERNET AGE ARE PLAINLY arguable. However, this is not a debate that will end in a vote that determines the outcome by majority rule, which is why predicting where things will go next is so hard. Still, what is known, earnestly but correctly, as accountability journalism—news that orders and monitors the world—is indispensable, and paying for it is vital to society. We now know conclusively that digital delivery is going to be a (or perhaps the) main way people find out what is happening around them, so the burden of responsibility on those who frame the way news is presented is incalculable.

Google is in its adolescence as a company. Cycles in the digital era tend to be short, but Google and the enterprises and services it encompasses are at the pinnacle now. What the company will do with that power is unknown in large part because, like most big institutions, Google limits transparency and is defensive when it comes to criticism.

There is a message in history for Google's leaders: nothing in the realms of business, information, entertainment, or technology remains as it is. Brin and Page stand on the shoulders of Gates and Jobs who followed Watson, Sarnoff, and Paley, who came after Luce and Disney and succeeded Hearst, Edison, and Bell. The next breakthrough innovators are doubtless at work somewhere. Will they help meet society's fundamental demand for news that supports itself in a way that Google and the rest of the digital generation say they want to do, but have not yet done?

Google is an extraordinary company with a nonpareil record of creativity. What a wondrous thing it would be for newsgathering, in a time of mounting crisis, if Google turned out to be as much a source of solutions as it is a part of the problem. **CJR**

PETER OSNOS, CJR's vice-chairman, is the founder and editor-at-large of PublicAffairs Books and a senior fellow for media at The Century Foundation. His previous CJR piece was about the future of books.

Open for Business

If you want readers to buy news, what, exactly, will you sell? The case for a free/paid hybrid.

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO

In the dark winter and spring of 2009, as dispatches from the news business grew ever more grim, as Jim Romenesko's posts took on the feel of casualty reports, newsrooms across the land began to feel like the Emerald City when the Wicked Witch soars overhead, trailing smoke and sending everyone scurrying not for cover, but for an answer, to the Wizard. So it was that in the midst of this gloomy time help appeared, and not merely

the illusion of a wizardly hand. It came from Walter Isaacson and from Steven Brill, who were quickly joined by a determined chorus that, no longer willing to stand idly by as its trade died, took up a call that was clear, direct, and seemingly unassailable in its logic: *make the readers pay*.

They envisioned a happy time in which people so loved, or at least appreciated, what journalists did that they would pay to listen, watch, and read online. Excited by the prospect of compensation commensurate with their best efforts, news people raced to find evidence to support this encouraging talk. Suddenly, Peter Kann, dismissed as hopelessly un-Webby when he placed *The Wall Street Journal* behind a paywall in 1996, was being touted in retirement as a man so prescient about revenue streams that Rupert Murdoch, who had taken over Dow Jones with thoughts of bringing that wall down, was now preaching the wisdom of charging for access. People pointed to the money that came from subscribers to such

sites as *Congressional Quarterly*, *Consumer Reports*, and *Cook's Illustrated* as evidence that Isaacson, who had made his case first at a speech this winter at the Aspen Institute and then on the cover of *Time*, had been right. Readers not only would pay, but were already paying. They paid for information and for access to newspaper Web sites, too—in places like Little Rock, Albuquerque, and Lewiston, Idaho. They paid by the year, the month, the week. Perhaps they might even pay by the story—a micro-payment, like for a song on iTunes.

But then, as often happens when euphoria is built on hope born of despair, the good feelings began to recede. The readers-will-pay chorus was ever more drowned out by the voices of the doomsayers, the apostles of information-wants-to-be-free.

Paid content, they insisted, was an illusion. Take a closer look at the sites that charge, they argued, and you will see flaws in your logic: for one, many of them cater to audiences of narrow interest—lobbyists compelled to follow legislation through every subcommittee; business people whose firms cover the costs, so that they might make a buck at the expense of their competitors; lovers of the best, kitchen-tested recipe for Yankee pot roast. And as for those few newspapers that had gotten away with charging for Web access, note that almost all were small, or the sole purveyors of news for hundreds of miles around. These voices were joined by those who saw in the vanishing of the American newspaper a necessary death—much like the Israelites wander-

ing the desert for forty years, waiting for those wed to the old ways to die out.

And so it went, variations on familiar themes that tended to leave little room for the clutter of a middle ground. The back and forth produced a stalemate on the difficult question of whether it was possible, or reasonable, to expect people to pay for news that they had come to believe should be free.

But it obscured the big questions that, logic suggested, would have to come next: If you were going to charge, what, precisely, were you going to sell? And if you sold something new, would that alter, or even revolutionize, the nature of the news?

One

In the beginning, there was the 900 number.

The service had been around for decades when, in 1987,



AT&T allowed businesses leasing 900 numbers to charge for calls. People started to pay—for sports scores, news, weather, and stock quotes. Men also paid, sometimes quite a lot, to listen to women talk dirty. The change in dialing habits revolutionized the idea of the phone call. The telephone was no longer merely a device that allowed for remote conversation at minimal cost. It became a vehicle for running a business—you could make money with a phone, so long as you sold what people wanted to buy.

That lesson was not lost with the coming of the Internet. Even as people fretted about whether anyone would figure out a way to make a buck online, the pornographers, ever on the vanguard, shifted technologies and began charging not merely for a voice, but for a peek. Others took notice, with higher aspirations. Even as the early apostles of Web culture extolled the virtues of every-man-a-publisher, content did, in fact, go on sale.

Some of it sold. Much didn't—or at least not enough, in the news business, to make up for all the potential lost advertising revenue that has always been the financial backbone of the industry. Slate charged for access for about a year, only to reverse itself in 1999. The *Los Angeles Times* charged for CalenderLive, only to drop the fee in 2005, after twenty-one months of declining page views and modest revenue. *Variety* and Salon took down their paywalls, as did many of the handful of small newspapers that had charged—among them the *Creston* (Iowa) *News Advertiser*, the *Newton* (Iowa) *Daily News*, and the *Aiken* (South Carolina) *Standard*, whose page views tripled after its wall came down in 2007. The *New York Times* ended TimesSelect in 2007, having calculated—at that time—that it could more than make up for the \$10 million in lost revenue with the advertising generated by all the many new visitors to its site.

'We're like heroin for UT football fans. We've got all the nuts that exist. We cover what the people want to pay for.'

Still, there were holdouts, and the titan among the paid-content stalwarts was and remains *The Wall Street Journal*, which continues to charge subscribers \$100 annually. While the number of subscribers has grown steadily to its present one million, they pale in comparison to the 20 million monthly unique visitors to *The New York Times*, which, for the moment, remains entirely free—but may not be for much longer.

The sense among the free-content advocates, though, is that the *Journal*, great as it is, is an outlier, a publication not

written for a general audience but for the world of commerce. The same was being said of other specialized online publications that cater to people with a financial stake in the news they provided. The growing online presence of the trade press, in the view of the believers in free content, meant only that people already conditioned to spending hundreds or thousands of dollars a year for the brand of news that served their particular needs were now logging on, and not waiting for the newsletter to arrive.

Besides, walled-off content meant content that was not searchable, which meant that it did not draw the great flows of online traffic in a world where the hyperlink had become the coin of commerce and notice.

Sites like CQ.com—which boasted a multitude of databases, brought in about 43 percent of CQ's annual revenue (somewhere between \$50 million and \$100 million; the company is privately held and will be no more precise about earnings), and had a large editorial staff (CQ Inc. employs more than 165 people)—while admired for the work they produced, were nonetheless relegated to the fringe because they were not part of the greater, link-driven conversation. And hadn't CQ subsequently started a free site, CQ Politics, which, while it generated less than 2 percent of the company's revenue, did attract an average of 450,000 uniques a month, ensuring that CQ was not left out of Washington's overheated political conversation?

The criticism was much the same for those sites that sold news whose value was not necessarily fungible—politically or financially, either in money earned (the business-to-business press) or in money well spent (*Consumer Reports*). These sites sold news that mattered only because everyone in particular slivers of the online world was talking about it. These were the sites that had occupied small pockets of Chris Anderson's Long Tail, his theory about the rise of niche businesses online. Places like Orangebloods.com.

Orangebloods is a site that, depending on the time of year, has between eight thousand and ten thousand subscribers paying \$9.99 a month, or \$100 annually, for steady updates about all known thought regarding the University of Texas football team. The site covers practices and assesses the team's strengths and potential worries, but the least important thing it does is cover games. Everyone covers games, the reasoning went, and everyone watches games. So instead, Orangebloods found a niche within a niche: it reports and sells what no one else can provide, which is year-round coverage of Longhorns recruiting. Its reporters fan out across the state, and sometimes across the nation, meeting, observing, and collecting footage of leading high-school football players. They then pour all this into the Orangebloods site along with information about those potential Longhorns' size, speed, bench-pressing capacity, and GPAs, all the while offering interviews, commentary, starred rankings, and candid assessments of the Longhorns' chances of securing a commitment: *Solid verbal!*

Orangebloods is one of the 130 paid college-football sites that are part of Rivals.com, which Yahoo bought in 2007 for \$100 million. Rivals is run by Bobby Burton, who in the early 1990s, as an undergraduate at Texas, worked in the football



Hook 'em! A number of University of Texas football fans pay for year-round coverage of the Longhorns' recruiting effort.

team's film library, converting film to video and then editing the footage so that coaches could study, say, tendencies on third and long. Burton took that passion—he uses the word often—to the *National Recruiting Advisor*, a newsletter that reported on recruiting and augmented its service with updates on, yes, a 900 number.

The business went through several iterations—free, then paid, then failing—before re-emerging in 2001. By then Burton had abandoned the idea of using citizen journalists to do his reporting for him, having determined that he needed professionals. In time, the combined editorial staff at Rivals grew to over three hundred and, as the site's reputation grew among the college-football cognoscenti, its subscriptions rose to its present 200,000; Orangebloods is among the most popular.

And that popularity, that desire to subscribe, says its editor, Geoff Ketchum, is as much about the news it reports as it is about the talking and ruminating with an audience that cares beyond all apparent reason about Longhorn football. They make full use of the site's message board, offering lengthy and deeply-felt opinions, and talk with one another with such familiarity that when one subscriber's child was diagnosed with cancer, his online friends raised money for treatment.

"We're like heroin for UT football fans," Ketchum says. "We've got all the nuts that exist." He says this with the affection of someone who recognizes his own. "We don't cover all the sports," he adds. "We cover what the people want to pay for."

Two

But would the people pay for news aimed not at the few but at the many? As zealots on either side of the pay divide duked it out, Nancy Wang ran the numbers. The news was not good. For either side.

Wang, who with her husband, Jeff Mignon, runs a Manhattan media consulting firm, crunched nine different scenarios for newspapers of two different approximate sizes—100,000 paid circulation and 50,000. (Here her base scenario was for most typical American paper, which has 50,000 circulation, publishes seven days a week, charges \$17 a month for print subscribers, has a Web site with 250,000 unique visitors, and online revenues of \$700,000.) The analysis, Wang says, were based on real numbers, but were intended as projections of potential, not actual, revenue.

Her conclusions, which were reported in March 2009 by the Newspaper Association of America, essentially boiled down to this: once a newspaper put all its content behind a paywall, online subscriptions dropped dramatically and those subscriptions did not come close to making up lost advertising revenue. The advertising projections, she explains, were based on "very conservative," pre-recession numbers. "It's hard to say that putting in a paid model for content would pay on its own," she says.

But her results were not all that encouraging for the free-content crowd, either—those who advocate an advertising-only model despite the fact that revenue for online ads, though rising, is a fraction of what it is for print.



The online scenario that worked best, she concluded, was a compromise—combining free and paid content, at a percentage of 80 to 20, free to paid. But, she cautions, “there has to be something that people are willing to pay for.”

Could that “something” be local news? Wang built her analysis on numbers from the NAA, the media buyers AdPerfect and Centro, as well as from Borrell Associates, a Virginia consulting firm whose president, Gordon Borrell, had for years preached that publishers were wrong if they continued to believe that local news as currently constituted would sell.

Borrell had begun his career as a reporter for *The Virginian-Pilot*, and so came to his conclusion with an understanding and empathy for the work reporters do. The problem, as he saw it, was that newspapers assumed they could continue to sell what he regarded as a tired and tedious product in a new medium simply because they had done so well selling it in an old one.

Borrell had issued his first comprehensive study on paid content shortly after the 9/11 attacks, a time when the public was devouring news, and so a moment when the prospect of online revenue would be running high. He surveyed nearly 1,900 online-newspaper readers and discovered that while people were willing to register for sites—a necessity in attracting advertisers—and might be willing to pay for some news, they were not about to start paying for general online news they had become accustomed to getting for free. He had thought at the time that they might, one day.

Lack of competition was good for profits but turned many dailies into vanilla approximations of themselves.

But now, eight years later, he saw no evidence of that happening. Readers simply did not value local news enough to pay for it. Borrell found only about 12 percent of most markets went to the Web for local news.

They still bought newspapers, though in diminishing numbers, and quite often not with the same imperative that drove Borrell's one-time newsroom colleagues. While journalists envision people tossing out the coupons to get to the news, many readers perform the ritual in reverse—tossing the news to get to the coupons, a practice confirmed by an NAA study that found that fully half of all readers bought local papers for the ads. Such, Borrell concluded, was the fate of a product that, in the eyes of its intended audience, was “not that compelling.”

But wait. Hadn't the industry been pinning its hopes for well over a generation on local news, on bringing to suburban

readers targeted versions of the traditional mix of local politics, cops, fires, courts, and the occasional strange doings that used to fill the big-city papers that everyone in town read? And hadn't the mix grown to include dispatches on schools and zoning and features of local interest? And hadn't some of that work been of consequence, hadn't it won awards and allowed publishers to speak of their “watchdog” role and to suggest, channeling Jefferson, that their work kept the citizenry informed and enlightened? *Not that compelling?*

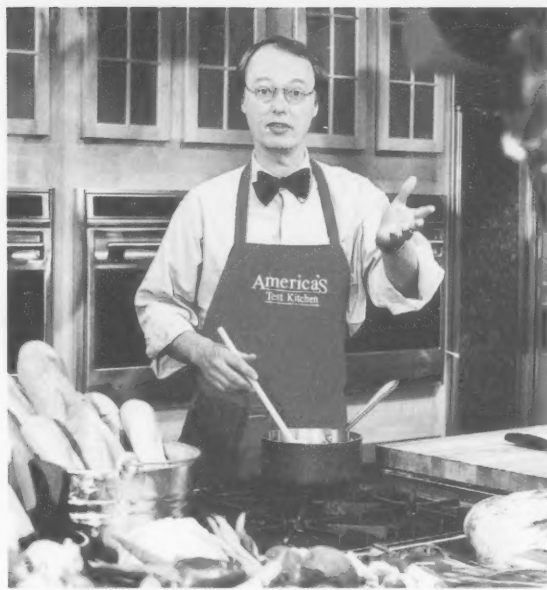
Or did Borrell have a point? Was it possible that the self-satisfaction with which news organizations regarded themselves and their role had been undermined and diluted? The news purists had been warning for years of the danger of a culture in which publishers cheapened the value of their content with cutbacks intended to satisfy investors and media analysts. But no one had paid them much mind, because even in a diminished state the product still sold. If you could do it on the cheap, why not?

But it was not just the shareholders' fault. Competition, the catalyst that drove journalists, that fueled their anxiety, fear, ruthless streaks—qualities of personality that propelled them to succeed—had been vanishing for decades. Fewer newspapers in fewer towns found themselves in direct competition for stories, and while this helped make a good many papers very profitable (Exhibit A: Gannett), it also had the effect of rendering many newspapers into vanilla approximations of themselves. The papers weren't necessarily bad; they looked good and read well enough. But it was hard to imagine anyone standing on a street corner shouting, “Extra! Extra! Read all about it!” when the headline screamed ZONING DISPUTE.

The problem with the content, however, did not stop there. Stories were ever more routine, in the subject and in the way they were told—so much so that news, as defined and presented, had for years been an ongoing object of parody in, most famously, *The Onion*.

The pity of it was that in the decades that preceded the recent downsizing of content, newspapers had been stretching the definition of news in ways that made papers of the more distant past seem hopelessly narrow. *Front Page* romanticism aside, readers of, say, the *St. Louis Star* in 1942 would have had no sense of the dark and frightened mood in town in the first winter of World War II, because the paper did not consider such matters news. A generation later, everyone, it seemed, had an investigative team, as well as education, immigration, and health-care reporters, and a local columnist or two. The best writing was no longer necessarily on the sports pages and there was no shortage of FOIA requests. The definition of news expanded, as did the way news was told.

But then, over a stretch of years long enough that it was hard to notice, the reports that came back from once-proud-and-lively newsrooms were that it was getting very hard to, say, sniff out local corruption or capture the zeitgeist of a community when your beat had expanded from three towns to ten, and when the unspoken but well-understood directive from above was to feed the beast, in print and, in time, online. Newspapers still produced admirable work, but the appearance of another plaque on the newsroom wall tended to obscure the fact that while great work was still being accom-



Stirring Chris Kimball's *Cook's Illustrated* readers pay for recipes.

plished, a good deal of what was otherwise being done was of diminishing value and allure.

So for Borrell, editors and publishers and owners who rallied to the cry of paid content were working under the misapprehension that what they had given away or sold very cheaply would suddenly be regarded as having value by readers whose needs had been sadly undervalued for a long time.

But Borrell still believed that there was money to be made in the news business—online and in print. Print was the place for display advertising, and for all those coupons and end-of-summer ads. Free online access brought the readers—the eyeballs—advertisers wanted. As for paid content, Nancy Wang and Jeff Mignon had for some time been preaching the virtues of a hybrid approach of mixing paid and free online content to the fifty or so news organizations of various sizes they consulted for, and the result, she says, was almost always the same: the young, Web-savvy people would get excited by the possibilities, and their older, more tradition-bound editors, she says, would scream, “NO!”

The resistance, she explains, was not a function of blind stubbornness, but rather a fear that that which they hold sacred was about to be diluted in the name of making a buck. And they were not altogether wrong.

It was at this moment in the conversation that publishers and editors were forced to confront a difficult choice: if a newsroom had a finite number of reporters, and if that newsroom needed a new revenue stream to make up for declining circulation and lower ad rates, it needed to report something that people wanted enough to pay for. Not all people. Just some, with the money and the willingness to pay.

That, in turn, meant *not* devoting the time, the staff, and

the money to report on what was presumably of interest to everyone. It meant making the choice to provide content that was exclusive to paying customers. It meant satisfying the core readership at the expense of those unwilling, or perhaps unable, to prove their loyalty with a check or money order.

Something had to go, if you were going to stay in business. But if you were going to start selling news, you had decide what you could offer that people might buy.

And so once the conversation moved past the arguments about the *idea* of paying, and it became ever more apparent that news organizations would do well to charge for *something*, the word heard most often was “value.”

Three

Peter Fader was such a fan of TimesSelect—the opinion-oriented section that *The New York Times* briefly put behind a paywall—that had the price doubled he would gladly have paid it. TimesSelect represented value for Fader, a quality, he says, that always eclipses price when a purchase is being considered. Fader is a professor of marketing at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. He explains that pricing “is a trade-off attitude.” Economists, Fader says, often make the mistake of building projections upon the supposition that people are rational beings. But people, he says, will perform the irrational act of paying for all kinds of things that they can otherwise get for nothing.

They will, for instance, pay 99 cents for songs on iTunes that can be downloaded for free because Apple makes the transactional experience not only legal, but easy, attractive, and accessible. People will also pay for subscriptions. They will, for example, willingly allow their bank accounts to be dunned \$17 a month for Netflix even though weeks may pass without a rental or download. No matter, Fader says; those subscribers have fallen into an “electronic trance” in which they refuse to cancel because they anticipate renting one day, real soon.

Perhaps the best and most alluring analogy for selling news online is cable television. TV used to be free and in some places still is. But cable transformed the idea that the medium came without cost by making it into a medium that provided a wide choice of occasionally terrific content that was exclusive to those who paid for it.

The transformation did not come instantly, and despite all the new channels, the experience of watching cable TV is often as it was in the old five channels-plus-UHF days: *Nothing's on*. But cable offers lots of choices, on a sliding scale, and Fader says people will continue to pay for the promise of value because whatever disappointments they might have experienced—for instance, a weeper on Lifetime—have been outweighed by, say, *The Sopranos*.

New technologies arrive with lamentations for the institutions and traditions and old technologies sure to die out. It was that way with television—the *death of movie theaters!* And with FM radio—the *end of live concerts!* But new technologies do not replace the old, they merely take a place at their side. Grand and aging movie palaces became multiplexes, and owners did such a brisk business that people decided it was worth spending an extra \$1.50 to pre-order tickets on Fandango. So



it is that Fandango sells what once came without cost, but which now represents admission denied to someone else.

That, in a sense, is also the calculus for success at *Congressional Quarterly*, which sells information that is available elsewhere at no cost but at considerable hassle. If you are, for instance, a lobbyist who needs to know the status of a particularly worrisome piece of legislation, *CQ* can sell you, through its BillTrack database, the full text and an analysis of the bill, its status in committee, a profile of that committee, a district-by-district breakdown of the members of the committee, a dollar-by-dollar breakdown of those members' campaign contributors—in short, everything a clever lobbyist needs to know *before* that information comes to another clever lobbyist for the opposition. This is what Robert Merry, *CQ*'s president and editor-in-chief, calls "information paranoia," a particularly virulent affliction in Washington.

CQ sells access to thirty-five different databases. It has four niche verticals—homeland security, health, a budget tracker, and its political money line. It does give some information away for free. So do *The Wall Street Journal*—a story at a time—and the *Financial Times*—a limited number of stories each month, before the paywall goes up. But these are, from a marketing standpoint, the journalistic equivalent of movie trailers on Fandango: *If you loved our report on this stimulus package, you'll want to see...*

Merry thinks of *CQ* as a pyramid. At its base are the many visitors to CQPolitics who pay nothing but who do deliver eyeballs. At the top are those so ravenous for particular slices of news they can use that they will pay \$10,000 or more a year for access. In other words, *CQ* sells various products for various media to audiences who differ not by geography or income but by need. It was doing so well before analysts like Wang and Mignon began preaching the virtues of the "hybrid" model to their sometimes-reluctant clients.

The Wall Street Journal will soon expand its existing free-for-a-single-story "hybrid" model into one that includes micropayments. *The New York Times* is considering such revenue streams as metered payments (like those at the *FT*) and premium content memberships that presumably would cater to the paper's most loyal readers. It is one thing for the *Times*, the *Journal*, and the *FT* to impose fees on some of their content because their content is so highly regarded by so many. But what of those general news publications that have done away with so much of their original coverage of anything that is not local, and have diminished even that? Are they doomed? Or can they save themselves by redefining their content, and by extension, news?

General news has long been predicated on the idea that people's primary interest in news was defined by where they lived. But that was never completely so. The ethnic press, for instance, is as much about where you are from as about where you landed. Similarly, magazines are now almost exclusively defined by the particular interests of their readers. (The demise of the general-interest magazine offers a powerful and emotional parallel to the fate of the general-interest newspaper: a generation ago it seemed impossible to envision an America without *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Look*.)

Yet most newspapers still represent a model defined by borders. This makes for a relatively easy business to run when most readers lived in one place—a small town or a city. With the post-World War II exodus to the suburbs, however, the urban newspaper model built on cops, courts, fires, and politics was essentially picked up and transplanted not to one locality but to many disparate places where, it was assumed, readers had little interest in the goings-on across the town line, and the ever more remote downtown. Gone was the big-city paper; in its place came the regional daily.

But now, *The Washington Post*, for one, has begun to embrace the idea of defining itself not as the newspaper of Washington, the physical entity, but as Washington, the idea—just as *The Wall Street Journal*, which the *Post*'s new editor, Marcus Brauchli, used to run, is not about Wall Street, a district in lower Manhattan. In a memo to her staff last December, the *Post*'s publisher, Katharine Weymouth, wrote of the paper as "being about Washington, for Washingtonians and those affected by it." The latter phrase is key. It suggests that the paper is both acknowledging the physical boundaries of a portion of its coverage—"the indispensable guide to

Transform the everyday work of journalism from a reactive, money-losing proposition into a more selective enterprise.

Washington"—while expanding beyond them. It means that Washington is, in a sense, everywhere—in every tax dollar, FAA hearing, wherever Washington's institutions and influence reach. A new and different hyper-local.

If this succeeds, what's to stop, say, the *Detroit Free Press* from augmenting its definition of Detroit as a municipality with Detroit as an idea—say, all things automotive? There is news in cars, lots of it. And there are people who need to know it, not all of them residents of greater Detroit. One wonders what the denuded *San Jose Mercury News*, a paper that had been a model of the regional news organization, might have become had it positioned itself as the definitive source of tech news for a readership well beyond Silicon Valley.

Once a news organization sees itself as something more than in service of a place, it puts itself in a position to tap into one of the emotional imperatives that sustain the niche sites. Geoff Ketchum's Orangebloods, for instance, is not limited to resident Texans. Regardless of where they live, his core readers have proven themselves willing to pay for the knowledge his site offers so that they can remain a part of a conversation. "Newspapers can't entice us into small payment systems," argues the media thinker Clay Shirky, "because we care too much about our conversation with one another...." Newspapers, as presently defined, cannot. But if

Orangebloods can, why can't a vertical on what is otherwise a general news site?

Those conversations can be inclusive (pay \$9.95 a month and become an Orangeblood) or exclusive (CQ BillTrack), but what they have in common is that each, in a sense, represents what might best be called a Community of Need. The need is for the news that fuels a particular conversation. So long as there is something new to report.

Niche sites succeed, in large measure, by staking out a line of coverage that represents precisely the kinds of stories that newspapers decided to abandon years ago because so many readers found them so tedious: process stories. The relentless journey of a bill through a legislative body—*cloture vote!* Tracking a running back as he decides between Baylor and Texas. But process stories are stories that, by their nature, offer an endless source of developments; there is always something new happening, even if to those on the outside of the conversation, it is news of little value. Robert Merry wonders, for instance, why so many newspapers abandoned their statehouse bureaus when those capital cities were awash in money, lobbyists, legislators, and eager-beaver aides who'd be willing to pay quite a lot for information that might give them an edge. They did so because most readers said the stories were boring—and that was true for most readers, but not all.

But there is an important caveat: such projects do not succeed if they're done on the cheap. They require reporters whose primary responsibility is to supply the endless news that feeds those relatively few readers' needs. The need is for news. Not opinion. (Bobby Burton is not alone in believing the *Times* erred in what it chose to place behind its Times-Select paywall, which was not news but the opinions of its famous columnists.) The problem with opinion is that the Web has made everyone a columnist precisely because it costs nothing to offer a point of view. Nor does it cost very much, or sometimes nothing at all, to fill a site with well-intentioned work, and opinion, provided by citizen journalists. But as Burton discovered in the early days of Rivals, those amateur journalists may have wise and clever things to say, but when he wanted to regularly break news he went out and hired people who knew how to do it—and he pays them between \$30,000 and more than \$150,000 a year.

Orangebloods is only as good as its next scoop; because if its stories begin appearing with any frequency someplace else—and perhaps, for free—the compact that Ketchum has with his readers is in jeopardy. Which is why there is nothing passive or reactive about the site's approach to its work. That, however, has not always been the case for general news that has traditionally defined itself by default: it's news because it's always been news. This, in turn, has created a culture of news in which the operative verb, far too often, is *said*, a culture in which all a reporter needs to do is listen and record.

As a result, too much of what fills the news pages is, as is often said, stenography. And because it can be done quickly, and at great volume, and with relatively little effort, it endures. The timing could not be more dispiriting, given that the generation in power in journalism now came to the field with a sense of journalism's possibilities, and broadened the idea

of what news could be. But this generation also came of age at a time of growing newsroom prosperity.

This expanded sense of what the content could be made newspapers fatter; new sections appeared; nothing had to go, save for those process stories that no one wanted to read. Not a tough choice. Not like now, when the redefinition of news may mean deciding what you can sell to those willing to pay, and, by extension, what you will give up in the rest of the day's report so that you can redeploy your shrinking staff.

Inevitably, this raises an existential issue: What are newspapers for? Do they exist to serve narrow bands of interest? Or are there issues that transcend the paying niches, journalistic responsibilities that we should worry might well be overlooked and ignored in the interests of satisfying those who foot the bill?

It is not enough to simply hope that editors and publishers will retain their nobler instincts, not when times are tough. But, at the risk of sounding cynical, there is every reason to believe that they might continue offering stories of consequence for a larger, and perhaps unpaying audience for another reason—because it might be good for business. There are stories that transcend demographic borders. They are stories that are universal in their appeal, and infectious in their presentation. Not all novels, after all, are written for niche audiences; some speak to people who, on the surface, have nothing in common with one another. And as it is with novels, and movies, and television shows that attract wide followings, there are stories that capture the eye and the imagination, and which lure readers who might stick around, or even come back, and bring advertisers with them. The burden rests on the news organization to do what news people have always done: find those stories.

So it is that journalism's crisis offers an opportunity to transform the everyday work of journalism from a reactive and money-losing proposition into a more selective enterprise of reporting things that no one else knows. And choosing, quite deliberately, to ignore much of what can be found elsewhere.

People will pay for news they deem essential, and depending on the depth and urgency of their need, they will pay a lot. Their subscriptions, in turn, might well help to underwrite the cost of producing original work that might remain free and be of interest to more than a select few.

Those subscriptions will not save newspapers. They alone will not pay for the cost of reporting. No one revenue stream will—not online or print advertising, or alerts on handheld devices, or new electronic readers that display stories handsomely. The hope is that they *all* will.

The means of distributing the news will change, but what is clear and unchanging is people's desire to know things, to be told a story, and to be able talk about it all with other people—for such things matter.

Extra! Extra! Read all about it! CJR

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Build the Wall

Most readers won't pay for news, but if we move quickly, maybe enough of them will. One man's bold blueprint.

BY DAVID SIMON

To all of the bystanders reading this, pardon us. The true audience for this essay narrows necessarily to a pair of notables who have it in their power to save high-end journalism—two newspaper executives who can rescue an imploding industry and thereby achieve an essential civic good for the nation. It's down to them. The rest of the print journalism world is in slash-and-burn mode, cutting product and then wondering why the product won't sell, rushing

to give away what remains online and wondering further why that content is held by advertisers to be valueless. The mode is full-bore panic.

And yet these two individuals, representing as they do the two fundamental institutions that sit astride the profession, still have a card to play, and here's a shard of good news: it's the only card that ever really mattered. Arthur Sulzberger Jr. and Katharine Weymouth, publishers of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, are at the helms of two organizations trying to find some separate peace with the digital revolution, though both papers have largely failed to do so, damaging their own still-formidable institutions and, on a deeper level, eviscerating more vulnerable regional newspapers and newspapering as whole. Yet incredibly, they delay, even though every day of inertia means another two dozen reporters somewhere are shown the door by a newspaper chain, or another foreign bureau closes, or another

once-precise and competent newsroom decides it will make do without a trained city editor, an ombudsman, or a fully staffed copy desk.

This then, is for Mr. Sulzberger and Ms. Weymouth:

Content matters. And you must find a way, in the brave new world of digitization, to make people pay for that content. If you do this, you still have a product and there is still an industry, a calling, and a career known as professional journalism. If you do not find a way to make people pay for your product, then you are—if you choose to remain in this line of work—delusional.

I know that content wants to be free on the Internet. I know that the horse was long ago shown the barn door and that, belatedly, the idea of creating a new revenue stream from online subscriptions seems daunting and dangerous. I know that commentary—the froth and foam of print journalism—sells itself cheaply and well on thousands of blogs. I know that the relationships between newspapers and online aggregators—not to mention The Associated Press and Reuters—will have to be revisited and revised. True, all true.

Most of all, I know that here you are being individually asked to consider taking a bold, risk-laden stand for content—that antitrust considerations prohibit the *Times* and the *Post*, not to mention Rupert Murdoch or the other owners, from talking this through and acting in concert. Would that every U.S. newspaper publisher could meet in a bathroom somewhere and talk bluntly for fifteen minutes, this would be a hell

of a lot easier. And yes, I know that if one of you should try to go behind the paywall while the other's content remains free, then, yes, you would be destroyed. All that is apparent.

But also apparent is the fact that absent a radical revisiting of the dynamic between newspapering and the Internet, there will be little cohesive, professional, first-generation journalism at the state and local level, as your national newspapers continue to retrench and regional papers are destroyed outright.

You must act. Together. On a specific date in the near future—let's say September 1 for the sheer immediacy of it—both news organizations must inform readers that their Web sites will be free to subscribers only, and that while subscription fees can be a fraction of the price of having wood pulp flung on doorsteps, it is nonetheless a requirement for acquiring the contents of the news organizations that spend millions to properly acquire, edit, and present that work.

No half-measures, either. No TimesSelect program that



Good fences Could paywalls save professional journalism?

charges for a handful of items and offers the rest for free, no limited availability of certain teaser articles, no bartering with aggregators for a few more crumbs of revenue through microbilling or pennies-on-the-dollar fees. Either you believe that what *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* bring to the table every day has value, or you don't.

You must both also individually inform the wire-service consortiums that unless they limit membership to publications, online or off, that provide content only through paid subscriptions, you intend to withdraw immediately from those consortiums. Then, for good measure, you might each make a voluntary donation—let's say \$10 million—to a newspaper trade group to establish a legal fund to pursue violations of copyright, either by online aggregators or large-scale blogs, much in the way other industries based on intellectual property have fought to preserve their products.

And when the Justice Department lawyers arrive, briefcases in hand, to ask why America's two national newspapers did these things in concert—resulting in a sea change within newspapering as one regional newspaper after another followed suit in pursuit of fresh, lifesaving revenue—you can answer directly: We never talked. Not a word. We read some rant in the *Columbia Journalism Review* that made the pay-wall argument. Blame the messenger.

TRUTH IS, A HALTING MOVEMENT TOWARD THE CREATION of an online subscription model already exists; at this writing, internal discussions at both the *Times* and the *Post* are ongoing, according to sources at both papers. And one small, furtive, and cautious meeting of newspaper executives took place in Chicago in May to explore the general idea of charging for online distribution of news. As for Rupert Murdoch, his rethought decision not to freely offer *The Wall Street Journal* online speaks volumes, as do his recent trial balloons about considering an online subscription model for less unique publications. Where the *Times* and the *Post* lead, Murdoch and, ultimately, every desperate and starving news-

paper chain will simply follow. Why? Because the need to create a new revenue stream from the twenty-first century's information-delivery model is, belatedly, apparent to many in the industry. But no one can act if the *Times* and the *Post* do not; the unique content of even a functional regional newspaper—state and municipal news, local sports and culture—is insufficient to demand that readers pay online. But add to that the national and international coverage from the national papers that would no longer be available on the Internet for free but could be provided through participation in the news services of the *Times* and the *Post* and, finally, there is a mix of journalism that justifies a subscription fee.

Time is the enemy, however, and the wariness and caution with which the *Times* and the *Post* approach the issue reveal not only how slow industry leaders have been to accurately assess the realities, but how vulnerable one national newspaper is to the other. Should the *Times* go behind a pay curtain while the *Post* remains free, or vice versa, the result would be a short-term but real benefit to the newspaper that fails to act, and fiscal bleeding for the newspaper attempting to demand recompense for work that is elsewhere being provided free of charge. Neither the *Times* nor the *Post* can do this alone.

Will it work? Is there enough demand for old-line, high-end journalism in the age of new media? Will readers pay for what they have already accepted as free? And can industry leaders claw their way back in time to the fateful point when they mistook the Internet as a mere advertising opportunity for their product?

Perhaps, though the risks are not spread equally. Given the savage cutting that has been under way at regional, chain-owned newspapers over the last decade or more, it may be too late for some metro dailies; they may no longer have enough legitimate, unique content to compel their readership to pay. But for the *Times* and the *Post*—entities that are still providing the lion's share of journalism's national, international, and cultural relevance—their reach has never been greater.

The proof is that while online aggregation and free newspaper Web sites have combined to batter paid print circulation figures, more people are reading the product of America's newspapers than ever before. Certainly more of them are reading the *Times* (nearly 20 million average unique visitors monthly) and the *Post* (more than 10 million monthly unique visitors), though they are doing it online and not paying for the privilege. And tellingly, the *Times*—its product still unmatched in print or online by other mainstream publications or anything that new media has yet offered—has transformed its print circulation into a profit center for the first time in years, merely by jacking up the price, with newsstand prices rising in June to \$2 and up to \$6 on Sunday.

Clearly, the product still moves. But to what purpose, when more and more readers rightly identify the immediate digitized version as superior, yet pay nothing for that version, and online advertising simply doesn't deliver enough revenue? If the only way to read the *Times* is to buy the *Times*, online or off, then readers who clearly retain a desire for that product will reach for their wallets. And those comfortable acquiring their news at a keyboard will be happy to pay much less than they do for home delivery.



No doubt some mavens of new media who have read this far have spittle in the corners of their mouths at the thought of the dying, tail-dragging dinosaurs of mainstream journalism resurrecting themselves by making the grand tool of the revolution—the Internet—less free. There is no going backward, they will declare, affronted by the idea that a victory already claimed can even be questioned. The newspaper is all but dead, they will insist. Long live the citizen journalist.

Not so fast. While their resentment and frustration with newspapers—given the industry's reduced editorial ambitions—are justified, their reasoning and conclusions are not. A little history:

For the first thirty years of its existence as America's primary entertainment medium, television was—after the initial purchase of the set itself—provided at no cost to viewers, instead subsidized by lucrative ad revenues. The notion of Americans in 1975 being asked to pay a monthly bill for their television consumption would have seemed farcical. Yet in the ensuing thirty years, we have become a nation that shells out \$60, \$70, or \$120 in monthly cable fees; indeed, whole vistas of programming exist free of advertising revenue, subsidized entirely by subscriptions.

How did this happen?

Again, content is all. The move to the pay-cable model was preceded by an expansive effort to create additional programming to justify the upgrade from network fare to multichannel packaging. In the beginning, some of that new content amounted to little more than feature-film purchases, additional sports, and twenty-four-hour news and weather. But ultimately, the quantitative increase in

The notion of Americans in 1975 being asked to pay a monthly bill for TV consumption would have seemed farcical.

programming was accompanied by a qualitative improvement in television fare. You paid more, you got more: HBO, Showtime, Cinemax, and, ultimately, a string of niche channels catering to specific audiences and interests. One can critique American TV however ruthlessly one wishes, but the industry is doing something right. More channels, more programming, more revenue—indeed, a revenue stream where none had existed.

By contrast, we have American newspapering, an industry that a quarter century ago was—pound for pound—as lucrative as television, with Wall Street commanding profit margins of 25 and 30 percent. As with television, circulation was accepted as a loss leader, strongly subsidized so that the

money it cost to deliver content was more than made up by advertising dollars.

But unlike television, in which industry leaders were constantly reinvesting profits in research and development, where a new technology like cable reception would be contemplated for all its potential and opportunity, the newspapering world was content to send its treasure to Wall Street, appeasing analysts and big-ticket shareholders. There was no reinvestment in programming, no intelligent contemplation of new and transformational circulation models, no thought beyond maximized short-term profit.

Incredibly, and in direct contrast to the growth of television, the remaining monopoly newspapers in American cities—roped together in unwieldy chains and run by men and women who had, by and large, been reared in boardrooms rather than newsrooms—spent the last of their profitable days *cutting* product, scaling back news holes, shedding veteran reporters, and reducing the scope of coverage. Hiring freezes and buyouts were ongoing in the early and mid-1990s, all of this happening amid the unspoken assumptions that the advertising base was everything, that content didn't really matter, that news was the stuff troweled into the columns next to the display ads, that there was more profit producing a half-assed, mediocre paper than a good one.

In the 1970s, American auto manufacturing was complicit in its own marginalization through exactly the same mindset: Why not churn out Pacers and Gremlins and Vegas, providing cheap, shoddy vehicles that would be rapidly replaced with newer cheap, shoddy vehicles? What would captive American consumers do? Buy a car from Japan? Germany? South Korea?

Well, yes, as it turns out. But the analogy doesn't quite capture the extraordinary incompetence exhibited by the newspaper industry. After all, a Toyota is a good car and all that was required for Detroit to begin its agonizing decline was for consumers to be offered a legitimate choice.

In the newspaper industry, however, the fledgling efforts of new media to replicate the scope, competence, and consistency of a healthy daily paper have so far yielded little in the way of genuine competition. A blog here, a citizen journalist there, a news Web site getting under way in places where the newspaper is diminished—some of it is quite good, but none of it so far begins to achieve consistently what a vibrant newspaper, staffed with competent, paid beat reporters and editors, once offered. New-media entities are not yet able to truly cover—day after day—the society, culture, and politics of cities, states, and nations. And until new models emerge that are capable of paying reporters and editors to do such work—in effect becoming online newspapers with all the gravitas this implies—they are not going to get us anywhere close to professional journalism's potential.

Detroit lost to a better, new product; newspapers, to the vague suggestion of one.

BEYOND MR. SULZBERGER AND MS. WEYMOUTH—AND YES, get cracking, you two; September comes fast—there is, in retrospect, a certain wonderment that so many otherwise

smart people in newspapering could have so mistaken the Internet and its implications. A lot has been written on this phenomenon and more will follow, but three factors are worth noting—if only because of their relevance to the online subscription model that is clearly required:

First, there is the familiar industrial dynamic in which leaders raised in one world are taken aback to find they have underestimated the power of an emerging paradigm.

When I left my newsroom in 1995, the Internet was a mere whisper, but even five years later, as its potential was becoming a consideration in every other aspect of American

The first subscribers to HBO watched bad movies and boxing, but as revenue grew, it paid for an expansion of product.

life, those in command of *The Baltimore Sun* were explaining the value of their free Web site in these terms: this is advertising for the newspaper. Young readers will see what we do by “surfing the Web” and finding our site, and they will read some, and then settle down and buy the newspaper.

Looking back, it sounds comical. Absent the buyouts and layoffs and lost coverage of essential issues, it would be buggy-whip-maker funny. But as it stands, the misapprehension of men and women who spent their lives believing in the primacy of newsprint is as tragic as the strategists who built battleships even after Billy Mitchell used air power to bomb one to the ocean floor in 1921. Regardless, it was industry-wide in newsrooms. On the business side, they were a little busy hurling profits at Wall Street to pay much attention.

Second, the industry leaders on both the business and editorial sides came of age in an environment in which circulation had long been a loss leader, when newspapers never charged readers what it actually cost to get the product to their doorstep. Advertising, not content, was all.

This specific dynamic maximized everyone's blindness to the real possibilities of a subscription model. Every reader who can be induced to accept an online subscription to a newspaper—at even a half or a third the price of doorstep delivery—represents the beginning of a new and quite profitable revenue stream.

For example, if *The Baltimore Sun's* product isn't available in any other fashion than through subscription—online or off—and if there is no profit to be had in delivering the paper product to homes at existing rates, then by all means, jack up those rates—raise hard-copy prices and drive as many readers as possible online, where you charge less, but at a distinct profit.

Yes, you would lose readers. But consider: 10 percent of the existing 210,000 *Baltimore Sun* readers, for example,

who pay a subscription rate less than half the price of home delivery, or roughly \$10, would represent about \$2.5 million a year. Absent the cost of trucks, gas, paper, and presses, money like that represents the beginnings of a solid revenue stream. In the same fashion, the first handful of subscribers to HBO watched bad movies and boxing, but as the revenue grew, it paid for original programming and, ultimately, a vast expansion of product. First, someone had to dream it. At newspapers, no one did. Newspaper dreams of the last fifty years involved luscious department-store display ads and fat classified sections—visions that can no longer be.

Last, and perhaps most disastrous, the rot began at the bottom and it didn't reach the highest rungs of the profession until far too much damage had been done.

As early as the mid-1980s, the civic indifference and contempt of product inherent in chain ownership was apparent in many smaller American markets. While this was discussed in some circles, usually as a matter of mild rumination, little was done by the industry to address a dynamic by which men in Los Angeles or Chicago or New York, at the behest of Wall Street, determined what sort of journalism would be practiced in Baltimore, Denver, Hartford, or Dallas. If you happened to labor at a newspaper that was ceding its editorial ambition to the price-per-share, it may have been agony, but if you were at the *Times*, the *Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or the *Los Angeles Times*, you were insulated. As the Internet arrived, profit margins were challenged and buyouts began at even the largest, most viable monopoly papers in regional markets. But only when the disease reached their own newsrooms did it really matter to the big papers.

Last year at *The Washington Post*, the paper's first major buyout arrived at about the time of its six Pulitzer victories. The day the prizes were announced, newsroom staffers publicly predicted that such winning journalism would likely not be replicated at the *Post* in an era of cutbacks. This, they moaned, might be the newspaper's last great prize haul. But of course the buyout of one hundred reporters at the *Post*, while painful and damaging, represented a bit more than a 10 percent reduction in force. At that point, the loss of the same number of reporters at *The Baltimore Sun* would have been a 30 percent reduction. The *Sun*, at this point, has had about eight rounds of buyouts and layoffs, beginning well before the arrival of the Internet, dropping the editorial staff from 500 to 160. Given that kind of carnage, there was no need for the *Post* to have any prize-based worries. In the end, the *Times*, the *Post*, and the *Journal* will be taking up more seats at the Pulitzer luncheon, not fewer. With whom, after all, do they think they are still competing?

The cancer devouring journalism began somewhere below the knee, and by the time the disease reached the self-satisfied brain of the Washington and New York newsrooms, the prognosis was far worse. Or to employ another historical metaphor: when they came for the Gannett papers, I said nothing, because I was not at a Gannett paper.

FOR THE INDUSTRY, IT IS LATER THAN IT SHOULD BE; WHERE a transition to online pay models would once have been easier



with a healthy product, now the odds for some papers are long. But given the timeline, here are a few possible outcomes, if the *Times* and the *Post* go ahead and build that wall.

First scenario: The *Times* and the *Post* survive, their revenue streams balanced by still-considerable print advertising, the bump in the price of home delivery and newsstand sales, and, finally, a new influx of cheap yet profitable online subscriptions.

And reassured that they can risk going behind the paywall without local readers getting free national, international, and cultural reporting from the national papers, and having seen that the paid-content formula can work, most metro dailies will follow suit. As they do, they re-emphasize that which makes them unique: local coverage, local culture, local voices—coupled with wire-service offerings from the national papers otherwise available only through paid sites.

Some of the chain dailies may well make the mistake of taking the fresh revenue and rushing it back to Wall Street. We need to worry that although readers, like television viewers, might be convinced to pay online for a strong, unique product, there is little in the last twenty years to suggest that

In our scenario, metro papers re-emphasize that which makes them unique: local coverage, local culture, local voices.

newspaper chains would reinvest to create such a product. For those papers, it's likely that a thin online subscriber base will reflect the hollowness of their product.

But in our scenario, others do reinvest in their newsrooms, hiring back some of the talent lost. Coverage expands, becomes more local, even neighborhood-based, which in turn leads to more online subscriptions, as well as additional online advertising lured by those subscribers.

Second scenario: In those cities where regional papers collapse, the vacuum creates an opportunity for new, online subscription-based news organizations that cover state and local issues, sports, and finance, generating enough revenue to maintain a slim—but paid—metro desk. Again, given the absence of circulation costs, such an outcome becomes, by conservative estimates, entirely possible.

Here is a back-of-the-envelope plan. In a metro region the size of Baltimore, where 300,000 once subscribed to a healthy newspaper, imagine an initial market penetration of a tenth of that—30,000 paid subscribers (in a metro region of more than 2.5 million), who are willing to pay \$10 per month. This is less than half their previous *Sun* home-delivery rate for the only product in town that cov-

ers local politics, local culture, local sports, and financial news—using paid reporters and paid editors to produce a consistent, professional product.

That's \$300,000 a month in revenue, or \$3.6 million a year, with zero printing or circulation costs. Moreover, that total doesn't include whatever money online advertising might generate. Advertisers—considering a *paid* circulation base rather than meaningless Web hits—might be willing to once again pay a meaningful rate.

Round it up to \$4 million in total revenue, then knock off a half million in operating and promotional costs. At \$100,000 a position for editors and reporters, that's a metro desk of some thirty-five paid souls, enough to provide significant coverage of a city and its suburbs. If the reporters are on \$50,000 contracts and benefits are not initially included, it's a newsroom of seventy—larger than the *Sun's* metro staff in the nineties.

And if that online-only, paid-subscription daily were a locally-run *nonprofit*, with every increase in subscriptions going to fund additional coverage, well, what more does professional journalism require to survive at the state and local level?

Third scenario: Except for one in which professional journalism doesn't endure in any form, this is the worst of all worlds. The *Times* and the *Post* survive because their coverage is unique and essential. But the regional dailies, too eviscerated to offer a credible local product, cannot entice enough online subscriptions to make do. They wither and die. And further, new online news ventures are stillborn because both national papers become exactly that—national.

Imagine major American cities without daily newspapers, and further imagine the *Times* or the *Post* employing just enough local journalists in regional markets to produce zoned editions—*The New York Times* with, say, a ten-person St. Louis bureau, giving readers two or three pages of metro, sports, and local business coverage. Or a *Washington Post* edition for the Baltimore region, using a dozen ex-*Sun* staffers to create a thin but viable product, where once a comprehensive metro daily once stood.

The joke then would be on the Justice Department lawyers as well. The longer it takes for the newspaper industry to get its act together, the more likely it is that regional dailies will be too weak and hollow to step through the online-subscription portal. Even localized Internet startups—the fledgling, digitized versions of professional newsrooms—will find themselves competing with, or bought out by, national monoliths. More monopoly, not less, for as long as we continue to fret the antitrust issues.

But all of this is, of course, academic. Because at this moment, Mr. Sulzberger and Ms. Weymouth have yet to turn that last card. Until they find the will and the courage to do so, no scenario other than the slow strangulation of paid, professional journalism applies. Meanwhile, we dare to dream of a viable, online future for American newsrooms. **CJR**

DAVID SIMON is a writer, author, and television producer. He is the creator of HBO's *The Corner*, *Generation Kill*, and *The Wire*. From 1982 to 1995, he was a reporter at The Baltimore Sun.

Leap of Faith

Inside the movement to build an audience of citizens

BY MEGAN GARBER

What inspired you to become a journalist?

I always liked writing, and I was also into photography. And I knew that the way I grew up was different from the way I was told I grew up—I wanted to figure out what the difference was. Also, I couldn't imagine working behind a desk from nine to five each day, wearing a tie.

What if a source lies to you?

Sometimes you'll hear a great story, right, and you'll really want to believe it. But you have to check things out—the line in journalism is, 'If your mother says she loves you, check it out.'

What happens if you make a mistake in a story?

One of the hallmarks of a good newspaper is that when they make a mistake, they admit it. A good paper will try to explain not just that they made a mistake, but how they made it. It's part of our contract with our readers.

David Gonzalez, a metro reporter and columnist for *The New York Times*, stands in front of a history class at the Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School in Brooklyn. More precisely, he is pacing, energetically, as he responds to questions fired at him, with equal energy, by a roomful of eighth-graders.

Do you ever use anonymous sources?

Where are corrections printed?

How do you find your stories?

Smiling—beaming—in the back of the classroom during the press-conference-in-reverse is Alan Miller, a former *Los*

Angeles Times reporter—he won a 2003 Pulitzer for his series on the defective Marine Corps' Harrier attack jet—who is also responsible for today's class. In early 2003, Miller founded the News Literacy Project, a program that mobilizes journalists both practicing and retired to share their profession with young people—to get them excited about journalism, and to help them navigate through the sea of news and sort the good from the bad. "I spoke about journalism to my daughter's sixth-grade class," Miller explains, "and was really surprised by what they didn't know about the basics of journalism." Positive student feedback from that talk convinced Miller of the need to teach students what standard history and civics classes generally don't: how to be savvy consumers of news.

Having just completed its pilot phase, the project has brought journalists from *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *USA Today*, NPR, *60 Minutes*, and other outlets to schools in New York City and Bethesda, Maryland. Miller hopes to expand to classrooms nationwide—he is exploring the prospect of launching a pilot in Chicago this fall, and in Los Angeles in 2010.

One of the members of the project's board is Howard Schneider, the former editor of *Newsday* and the founding dean of the School of Journalism at Stony Brook University. Schneider, too, saw the need for news-literacy education, as he explained in the Fall 2007 issue of *Nieman Reports*. "The ultimate check against an inaccurate or irresponsible press," he realized,

never would be just better-trained journalists, or more press critics and ethical codes. It would be a generation of news consumers who would learn how to distinguish for them-

selves between news and propaganda, verification and mere assertion, evidence and inference, bias and fairness, and between media bias and audience bias—consumers, who could differentiate between raw, unmediated information coursing through the Internet and independent, verified journalism.

Most journalists, Schneider noted, largely ignore the issue of educating consumers, focusing instead on the supply side of the journalism equation. To combat that, Schneider and his Stony Brook colleagues created a fourteen-week news-literacy course at the university, which addresses such topics

as objectivity, fairness, sourcing, and navigating the Web. To date, more than three thousand undergraduates have taken the class—and not just journalism students.

Both the Stony Brook course and The News Literacy Project are getting high marks from students. “Now I get the gossip, and everything else that everyone’s saying about the world,” says Daysha Williams, an eighth-grader at Williamsburg Collegiate who took the NLP pilot course this winter. “It’s like, okay, cool, but do you really know about it, or did you just get that from someone else?” Her teacher, Ryan Williams, sees the change, as well. “Three weeks ago, a lot of my students didn’t know what to look for in a newspaper article, or what Google actually did. Now they do, and I can build on that in class.”

That building-up is crucial. According to David T. Z. Mindich, a journalism professor and the author of *Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don’t Follow the News*, “It appears that if you don’t get into the news habit by your early twenties, you’ve missed the boat.”

‘Reach Them Where They Are’

The crisis facing journalism, though we often affix the word “financial” to it, is best understood in the context of an even more expansive problem: the broad decline of civic engagement. *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam’s 2000 study of the dissolution of civic life in America, owes much of its instant-icon status to the fact that the data it aggregated proved what many Americans already sensed: that we’re increasingly isolated from one another, and increasingly disillusioned about politics and other features of civic life. The down-

News organizations need to seek out young people and explain what they do and, more important, why they do it.

ward trends are so familiar, at this point, they hardly need detailing: declining participation in civic events, declining newspaper readership, declining knowledge about American democracy and the current events that inform it. And those declines are particularly precipitous among young people. The average newspaper reader is fifty-five years old; less than a fifth of Americans between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four claim to read—or even look at—a daily paper. As Evan Cornog put it in a 2005 essay in *CJR*, “When only 41 percent of teenagers polled can name the three branches of government while 59 percent can name the Three Stooges, something is seriously amiss.”

Yet there’s reason for optimism amid all the statistical

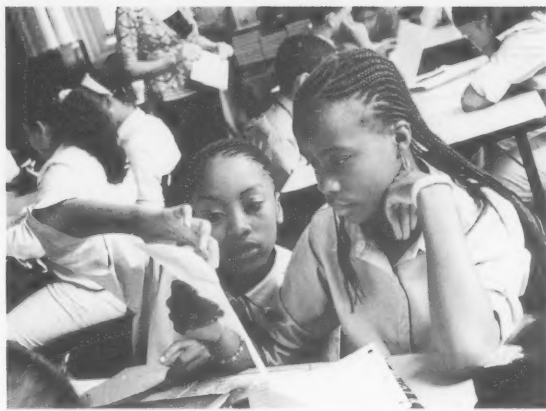
gloom. Some brighter stats, courtesy of a December 2008 Pew study: during the 2008 presidential campaign, 33 percent of Millennials (the generation born between 1977 and 1996) interacted with a 2008 presidential campaign—by visiting a candidate’s Web site, trying to convince family or friends to vote for a candidate, or visiting a candidate’s page on a social-networking site—while only 29 percent of Baby Boomers, and 26 percent of Gen Xers, did so. CNN’s viewership among the eighteen-to-thirty-four demographic shot up from 60,000 a night in February 2007 to 218,000 a night in February 2008—a jump likely fueled by the historic nature of the presidential campaign.

And it’s not merely the excitement of politics that engages young people: volunteerism, a classic measure of civic sensibility, is also on the rise. “New evidence from multiple sources confirms that those Americans who were caught by the flash of September 11 in their impressionable adolescent years are now significantly more involved in public affairs and community life than their older brothers and sisters,” Robert Putnam and Thomas Sandler wrote in a 2005 *Washington Post* op-ed. Young people also consume news in a more broadly “civic” setting than their parents and grandparents did. Millennials are more likely to get their news indirectly, via e-mail forwards, Twitter links, and the like, than they are from news outlets themselves. Ubiquity, though, has a way of compromising responsibility. Thus, the resonance of the quote, from a college student participating in a 2008 focus group: “If the news is that important, it will find me.”

We have, then, something of a paradox when it comes to young people’s civic engagement: they are reasonably engaged socially and politically, yet they too often lack the information necessary to translate their interest into a deeper, more substantive form of civic engagement. Young people are more socially connected, and have at their disposal more news and information than their parents could have imagined during their own youth. Lacking, however, is their knowledge of—and appreciation for—the kind of civic-minded news and information that a democracy requires, and that journalists produce. “Two out of ten times, I’m blown away by how well the kids articulate something they know,” says Audrey Harris, a social studies teacher at Williamsburg Collegiate who has been using Alan Miller’s curriculum with her seventh-graders. “And eight out of ten times, I’m horrified at what they *don’t* know.”

What’s to be done? The news-literacy programs that are currently in their gestational phases are certainly a start. But such projects are limited in their reach. The numbers in question—the approximately 650 students reached by Alan Miller’s four-month pilot program, Howard Schneider’s three thousand students—are admirable; set against the vast backdrop of young Americans, though, their impact is negligible. To call the programs’ effect on young people’s civic sensibilities a drop in the bucket would be to overstate the matter.

The programs also face the twin Goliaths of the bad economy (and its corollary, the bad gift economy) and the education system’s relative poverty and intractability. It’s no accident that Miller’s project has focused initially on charter



Skeptics Students scrutinize a chain e-mail about Obama for bias.

schools, which tend to offer more flexibility in their curricula than traditional public schools. And the Stony Brook course exists in large part because Shirley Strum Kenny, the president of the university, is a former journalist who believes strongly in the value of news literacy.

The good news is that news literacy has the potential to transform itself from the cause of a committed few into a powerful national movement. But such a transformation will require its own brand of civic engagement: news outlets themselves will need to join the effort. "News organizations have a vital role to play in terms of educating kids," says Vivian Schiller, CEO of National Public Radio and the chair of the News Literacy Project board. "The trick is how you do it. Because you can't just beat them over the head and say, 'Oh, you must read this newspaper, or you must listen to NPR.' We need to reach them where they are." And *where they are* is in the schools. And on the Web. "Young people don't see digital news as a reformation or revolution," notes Caesar Andrews, who until recently was the American Society of News Editors' chair of audience development. "For them, it just is."

The bottom line: news organizations need to make a point of seeking out young people—and of explaining to them what they do and, perhaps even more importantly, why they do it. News literacy offers news organizations the opportunity to essentially re-brand themselves. Rather than contort their content to a focus-grouped perception of audience desires, they can begin to help educate those audiences about the value of public-service journalism. Advocacy has its limits as far as journalism is concerned. But news literacy is a different kind of advocacy, and we need, as David Mindich says, "to allow journalists to be advocates for democracy."

News Literacy v. Media Literacy

The news-literacy movement is in many ways an offshoot of the larger media-literacy movement, which focuses on the critical analysis of media messages to detect propaganda,

censorship, and bias in those messages. Media literacy also focuses—and this is a big distinction between it and news literacy—on an appreciation of how the media's structural features (funding models, consolidation, commercial concerns) affect the information ultimately presented to the public. "You can't separate news literacy from advertising," says Renee Hobbs, a professor at the School of Communications and Theater at Temple University in Philadelphia and a leading proponent of media literacy education. "It's irresponsible to focus on the relations between reporters and sources and news value without positioning all of that in a larger context that has to do with increasing competition, the question of revenue streams, and the like."

Yet such a commercial focus can tend to emphasize rhetorical caricatures—liberal/conservative bias, corporate stoogery, etc.—over close reading of news items themselves. The best journalism has always been a deeply flawed effort to piece together a thorough understanding of the world. The goal of a good journalist—even one who works for a large corporation—unlike that of a good advertising executive, is to get at the most complete truth of a matter as is humanly possible. And taken too far, a focus on the commercial elements of the media can encourage cynicism rather than skepticism; it can breed a blanket distrust of journalism, rather than a healthy suspicion of its extremes.

News literacy, instead, is fundamentally about distinguishing—and appreciating—excellence. It's about telling students, says Alan Miller, "Here are the standards. Here's the ideal. This is what sets quality journalism apart." Teaching kids what makes good journalism and why good journalism matters, the thinking goes, will make them want to consume that journalism. "There needs to be an audience that recognizes good journalism," says Rex Smith, editor of the *Albany Times-Union* and education chair of the ASNE, "even when there's no longer a reflexive trust in the vendors of journalism." Underscoring that approach is the belief that excellence is self-reinforcing: quality will foster a large news audience—which, in turn, will foster more quality. "I used to read the *Daily News* or the *Post*," says Raquel Monje, a high school senior who studied the NLP curriculum at Manhattan's Facing History School this spring, referring to the city's sometimes sensational tabloids. "Now I read *The New York Times*."

The common ground uniting news literacy and its umbrella movement is their emphasis on the cultivation of savvy information consumers—and that shared mission is more urgent than ever. According to a recent study, fewer than a fifth of Americans say they can believe "all or most" media reporting—down from the already alarmingly low 27 percent that said the same five years ago. A large part of journalism's crisis in credibility—which is of a piece with its crisis in authority—comes from the poor job journalism has done to distinguish itself from "the media" more broadly. "The problem is that you see journalism disappearing inside the larger world of communications," the journalism scholar James Carey told Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach in *The Elements of Journalism*. "What you yearn to do is recover journalism from that larger world."

Reclaiming the Narrative

Journalism and those who practice it are—let's just say it—unpopular. Study after study confirms it. The extent to which journalists themselves are the victims or the cause is an open question, but the fact remains that our good name has been sullied since those halcyon post-Watergate years.

The news-literacy movement has the potential to begin to rewrite the unflattering narratives about the press that have become so pervasive that we've nearly stopped questioning them—to remove the derogatory undertone from the phrase “mainstream media.” It has the potential to push back against the hijacking of the journalistic reputation—not only by a sustained and strategic smear campaign on the part of the political right (“the liberal media”), but also on the part of the political left (“the corporate media”).

Such rehabilitation is necessary, in part, because the journalistic establishment as a whole, whether out of naïveté or complacency or both, has largely failed to defend itself. “While all those voices shouting from the left and right kept complaining about professional journalism,” says Ellen Hume, research director of MIT's Center for Future Civic Media, “nobody *within* journalism has been shouting back. I hear journalists talking to each other, wringing their hands, feeling unloved—but saying, ‘We’re not the story.’”

Part of the problem, as Hume suggests, is journalism's longstanding reluctance against advocacy. But part of it, too, is journalists' assumption of the self-evidence of their own civic significance: *that the people shall know*, and all that. Newspeople often forget how little the public appreciates, in every sense of the word, the press's role in democracy. A 2005 Knight Foundation report, which surveyed 112,000 students at public and private high schools nationwide, found a marked ignorance of—and, worse, apathy toward—the rights afforded by the First Amendment. Three-quarters of those surveyed thought flag-burning was illegal; half believed the government has the power to censor the Internet; and more than a third thought the First Amendment takes too many liberties, as it were, in its provisions of free expression. To teach news literacy is at once to highlight and fill a void in the journalistic reputation. As Nick Lemann, the dean of Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, put it in a recent commencement address, “I spend a lot of my time these days talking to nonjournalists about journalism, and I can tell you that we all have to learn to make a more sophisticated argument for ourselves.”

If we can do that successfully, we might just foster the flip side of our audience's respect: a respect *for* our audience. What if what audiences need is also what they *want*? The notion is not without precedent. A 2000 study of viewer trends in local TV news, conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, concluded exactly that: that excellence, on top of everything else, makes good business sense. “Quality is the best way to retain or increase lead-in audience,” the study asserted. And for that matter, “the surest way to lose lead-in audience is to trick up newscasts with easy gimmicks—eye candy, ratings stunts, and hype.”

And that's not true merely of TV news. “Over the long term, the history of news economics favors quality,” Tom

Rosenstiel, PEJ's director, points out. In the 1950s, he says, “People didn't know that it was going to be *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that were going to survive over the next fifty years.” Rather, many expected that it would be the tabloids—the papers with lower quality but larger readerships—that would be the future of news.

It is only mildly melodramatic, then, to suggest that news literacy is an attempt to reclaim reality itself.

At a recent screening of the news documentary *East Harlem IS*—produced by students at the Citizen Schools after-school program in New York City, in partnership with the News Literacy Project and produced under the direction of *The New York Times*'s Jane Bornemeier—Amy Perrette, a Citizen Schools board member, noted, “It's amazing what students can achieve when they're held to high expectations.” And that goes for journalism's audience, as well. As David Mindich puts it, “There's a part of everybody that wants to be elevated, that wants to be challenged.” Excellent journalism, he notes, appeals “to the better angels of our being.” And it makes us want more of it.

(Re)building the Audience

In spring 2005, the Carnegie Corporation commissioned a report, “Abandoning the News,” which examined the impact of declining resources in American newsrooms. The problem wasn't just one of resources—the supply side of news—the report's author, Merrill Brown, concluded. It was also one of demand. “The future of the U.S. news industry is seriously threatened by the seemingly irrevocable move by young people away from traditional sources of news.” The media critic Dan Kennedy put it a bit more bluntly in a recent *Guardian* column: “If journalists don't succeed at expanding the community of people who are interested and take part in civic life, then they are facing what will prove to be a hopeless battle.”

News organizations must start treating audience cultivation with a sense of urgency. Not merely as a matter of business—though that's certainly part of the equation—but also as a matter of democratic duty. “My thinking on this has really evolved from being, ‘Hey, wow, this is really a great thing for building audience for the *Times-Union*,’” says Rex Smith, “to thinking that this is a way to sustain journalism for our democracy.” While tough times tend to breed short-term solutions, the survival of news organizations depends on the size of their audience nest egg. “That long-term planning—

that long-term *planting*—is something that's been lacking," Mindich says. But "we *have* to see ourselves as part of the democratic process."

The problem isn't merely one of "citizenship," that vague yet powerful concept. The problem is also one of our relationship to truth itself. Call it the *True Enough* syndrome: as Farhad Manjoo put it in his 2008 book, "The limitless choice we now enjoy over the information we get about our world has loosened our grip on what is—and isn't—true." The threat that slack suggests is no less urgent for its Orwellian undertones: the fomentation, in Manjoo's phrase, of "a post-fact society." And of a media environment in which facts are increasingly assumed to be customizable—even optional. Think of cable punditry, where facts are so often fungible. Or that, according to a 2006 *National Geographic* poll, only 14 percent of Americans believe in evolution. Or that "swift boat" is now a verb. All that notwithstanding, truth isn't an opt-in/opt-out notion.

Which is much more than post-postmodernist balderdash. Citizenship relies on communally accepted modes of taking in and talking about the world—on a shared vernacular that is premised on a shared reality. ("There is a necessary connection between public associations and newspapers," de Tocqueville wrote in *Democracy in America*; "newspapers make associations and associations make newspapers.") Indeed, "shared" is a key aspect of news; vital to the oft-discussed relationship between information and democracy is information's communality—which is to say, its authority. When we can't agree on what the facts mean, what we have is vibrant debate; when we can't agree on what the facts *are*, what we have is cognitive anarchy. When James Madison declared that "a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives," we can safely assume that "knowledge," to him, was an empirical entity, not a cherry-picked cocktail of subjective "truths."

And yet. We are nearing a point—if, indeed, we're not already there—in which knowledge itself is becoming appropriated by the glibness of subjectivity. The Web's erosion of the storied "gatekeeper" function of the press, while it deserves celebration in so many senses, also creates a real danger for our democracy: through it, we now have nearly as many versions of truth—textual, historical truth—as we have news stories. Without a shared frame of reference—without the communal authority on which the power of the press has been predicated—we lose our bearings, stuck in the webs of our own comfort zones. While news will, of course, always have a subjective element to it—the very question of "What is news?", the sociologist Herbert Gans points out, is not merely definitional, but moral and political—we cannot allow news's humanity to overshadow its authenticity. News is neither sacred nor infallible; that doesn't mean it's not true.

It is only mildly melodramatic, then, to suggest that news literacy is an attempt to reclaim reality itself. Programs like the Stony Brook course and the News Literacy Project, paradoxically, validate the news precisely through the skepticism of it they aim to foster. Though their curricula examine varied platforms for information—newspapers, TV, radio,

blogs, Wikipedia, YouTube, and the like—they still subscribe to "the news" as a singular cultural agent, definable and therefore manageable. They serve as a sieve of sensibility that can help us filter through the split-second news cycle and the journalism it produces—"churnalism," the British journalist Nick Davies calls it—and counteract the vagaries of information overload. The news-literacy approach, in its simple but rather profound focus on "knowing what to believe," fights against the choose-your-own-adventure approach to reality: it attempts to make quality journalism a normalizing—which is to say, connective—force in a world that is increasingly fast, furious, and fragmented. The varying news literacy programs and projects out there are contemporary responses to the declaration made by Walter Lippmann in 1920: for communities that lack the information to distinguish between fact and fiction, "there can be no liberty."

The Sitting Duck and the Missionary

The question that hangs over the various news-literacy programs is the same question that always hangs over such ventures: Can the results match the rhetoric? Similar efforts have, after all, failed to inspire a new wave of savvy newspaper readers. In the eighties, newspaper-in-the-classroom programs were widespread. High schools regularly offered journalism classes that taught, essentially, news literacy as they taught other journalistic skills.

But one benefit of crisis is its corollary of creativity: now more than ever, journalism has a marked opportunity to reinvent itself and its role in the community. "Tear up the current models that perceive journalism as a craft," declares Nieman Foundation curator Bob Giles. "Rethink the field as one of rigorous scholarship and practice. And build anew around one truth: journalism matters. Give students that, and they will find their way."

And—who knows?—they might just find their way to journalism. In his autobiography, *A Reporter's Life*, Walter Cronkite observes that "life and the course we take through it are affected by many circumstances." He is "inclined to think in those lofty terms," the newsman notes,

when I think of those events that followed upon meeting Fred Birney, a rather slight man of unprepossessing mien who, despite his glasses, always wore a frown, as if he were looking for something beyond his range of sight. He was an inspired teacher who directed the course of my life. He wasn't even a professional teacher, but he had the gift.

Fred Birney was a newspaperman who thought that high schools ought to have courses in journalism. That was a highly innovative idea at the time, but by presenting himself as an unpaid volunteer and the program as a virtual no-cost item, he convinced the Houston school board. He spent a couple days each week circulating among Houston's five high schools preaching the fundamentals of a craft he loved.... I was a sitting duck for Fred Birney, missionary from the Fourth Estate. **CJR**

MEGAN GARBER is a CJR staff writer who covers news innovation.

A Man in Full

Four years after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans broadcaster Garland Robinette is still fighting mad

BY DOUGLAS MCCOLLAM

It was the birds that tipped him off. Two days before Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, while the storm was still out at sea and its path remained uncertain, Garland Robinette was coming out of his neighborhood coffeehouse when he noticed something strange. A large palm across the street, normally home to a flock of green parrots so noisy that talking near it was impossible, was empty and silent. As he walked home, Robinette

scanned the trees and phone lines of his Uptown neighborhood. Nothing. All the birds had vanished. His mind went back to the jungles of Vietnam where he had served as a Navy "Riverine," running commandos up rivers and canals on small boats. There the birds always knew before the troops when mayhem was at hand, and cleared out. That afternoon Robinette went on the air at WWL radio, the fifty-thousand-watt station that broadcasts across the gulf south from its home in New Orleans, and advised his listeners in no uncertain terms that they should follow their feathered friends out of town. "It's time to panic," he told them.

At the time of Katrina, Robinette was still a relative newcomer to radio. In the seventies and eighties he had been a fixture on New Orleans TV news, co-anchoring the 6-10 p.m. broadcasts at the highest-rated station in town with Angela Hill, his former wife of nine years ("Garangela," one press wag dubbed them at the time). But in 1990, Robinette,

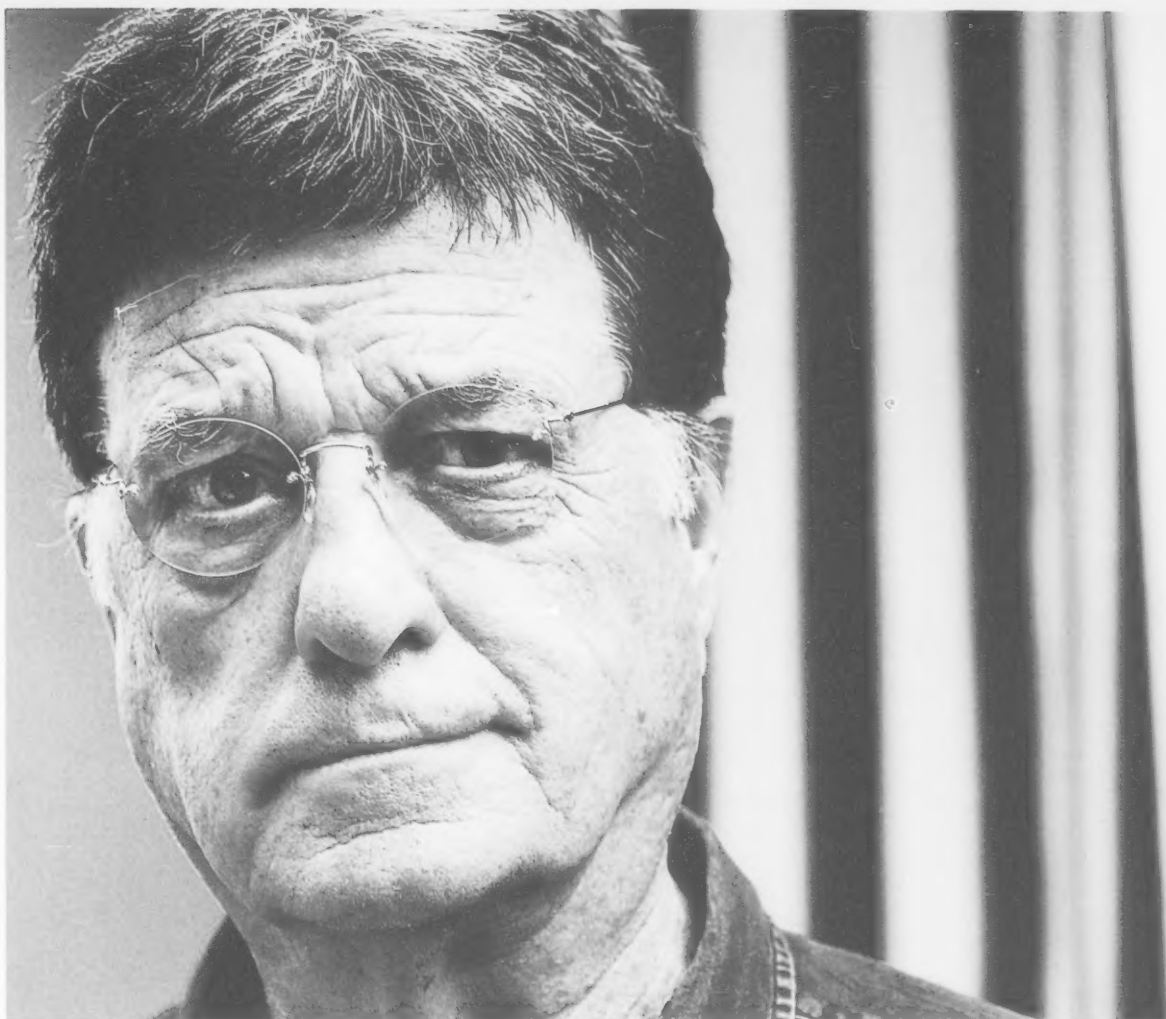
burned out and bored with a profession he'd come to find "superficial," walked away from what was as close to a lifetime appointment as you could hope to find in modern American journalism (Hill is still a lead anchor at the station). He moved to the country to paint and embarked on a successful stint in public relations. He thought he was done with broadcasting. I remember meeting him for the first time during this period at a mutual friend's wedding in Manhattan. When I told him I was newly enrolled in journalism school, he winced: "Why?"

But in 2004, when a close friend and popular radio talk-show host in New Orleans was diagnosed with cancer and asked Robinette to fill in, he agreed, though he admits he had long looked down on radio as the "trailer trash" of the media world. To his surprise, he found that its open format and close interaction with callers agreed with him. WWL asked him to go on the air full-time in 2005, a few months before Katrina struck the city.

Robinette's performance during and after the storm has become a piece of Katrina legend. The night of the storm, he stayed on the air even as the windows in WWL's downtown broadcast studio blew out. In the days and weeks that followed, he would sometimes broadcast twelve hours straight or more, working from a studio the size of a broom closet at WWL's makeshift studio in Baton Rouge. At a time when cable television and even electricity were scarce, Robinette's raspy voice was often all people had to steady them through the crisis. His interview with Mayor Ray Nagin a few days after

the storm, in which the mayor aimed a profanity-laced stream of invective at the federal government's failure to respond, went viral on the Internet and is considered, in retrospect, the turning point in getting the city help. "He really came into focus with that," says Dave Walker, who covers media for *The Times-Picayune*. "It was his emotion and raw reaction to the state of the response to the storm, coupled with Nagin's response. It's one of the most incredible pieces of broadcasting I've ever heard. Even the silences were devastating."

Robinette's pleas on behalf of New Orleans got him a star turn in Spike Lee's four-part HBO documentary about Katrina (though Robinette admits he had no idea who Spike Lee was). He developed an ardent fan base among the national press covering the storm, such as Brian Williams of NBC News, who called Robinette "iconic," and CNN's Anderson Cooper, who labeled him a pillar of the city. He even got an exclusive sit-down with President and Laura Bush.



The fighter Robinette would sometimes broadcast twelve hours straight in the days after Hurricane Katrina hit.

In the years since the storm, Robinette hasn't lost any of his passion but admits that he is weary at times. Broadcasting from WWL's new studio, with the Mississippi River Bridge framed outside his window, Robinette holds down the 10 a.m.-1 p.m. slot at the "Big 870." Soon to be sixty-six, he still has something of the look of a TV anchorman, but his voice has a pronounced croak, due to complications following surgery in 2007 to fix a snoring problem that left him coughing and bedridden for months, often unable to speak. Seated behind two computer screens, with CNBC muted on a nearby television and stacks of highlighted reference material on the desk in front of him, Robinette styles his show as a "think tank" and invites callers to challenge both his and their own preconceptions of the world. Robinette strives, with mixed results, to keep the tone highbrow—a rare commodity on

AM talk radio—directing his producers to screen obvious yahoos and callers who "don't have all their teeth." The goal is NPR but the result is more often Fox News-light. The callers tend to run conservative, as does Robinette in many areas, though he is at times a vocal backer of President Obama and is moderate on social issues.

Also, as much as Robinette may admire the cool, detached tone of public radio, his natural persona runs altogether hotter, and he is frequently a combative presence on the air. Despite almost forty years in broadcasting, he says his stomach still turns flips before a show. In the studio, he bounces in his seat and leans into the microphone, dabbing his finger on a moist Halls lozenge and sucking it to soothe his aching throat. He doesn't have much patience with callers he sees as mindless acolytes of what he calls the two

"stupid clubs"—the "Demedonts" and the "Republicans." And special woe unto the caller who happens to challenge Robinette's positions in one of the areas he sees as sacrosanct, such as the treatment of veterans, the evils of bureaucratic incompetence, and what he describes as the near-criminal negligence in the rebuilding of New Orleans.

One organization, above all others, has been a particular target of Robinette's wrath: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the institution charged with building and maintaining the hundreds of miles of levees that surround New Orleans and southern Louisiana. For Robinette, Katrina was not a natural disaster but a man-made one caused by the Corps's failure to maintain the levee system despite years of warnings that it was at risk of failure. A report to Congress on how the Corps plans to overhaul the levees, in the wake of Katrina, to withstand major hurricanes was initially due in December 2007, but still has not been finalized. When an investigation funded by the National Science Foundation discovered that the levee-rebuilding work done by the Corps after the storm had used a cheaper and more permeable type of soil, to save money, Robinette took to the air to call the Corps "a stupid, evil organization." (The Corps denied the foundation's charge.)

He is no less caustic in private. "What should I have called them?" Robinette says, his face clouding with anger. "When they rebuild levees they know will fail and they know people will die because of it?"

In May, Levees.org, a local watchdog group, found that the Corps had paid \$5.2 million over the last two years to an outside public relations firm to polish its image, touching off a fresh chorus of outrage that the Corps was spending more on image-building than levee-building. "Garland has a big heart and isn't afraid to say what needs to be said without fear of retribution," says Sandy Rosenthal, the head of Levees.org and herself a frequent critic of the Corps. "New Orleans can be like a factory town when it comes to the Corps. It's a big employer, spends a lot of money, has lots of contracts and vendors." (Despite numerous calls seeking comment, the Corps never made anyone available to discuss Robinette and his criticisms.)

Part of Robinette's frustration with the Corps stems from the fact that he has been sounding the alarm on the potential consequences of suspect levees and coastal erosion since he started in television in the early 1970s. "He recognized the problem and did really in-depth reporting on the issue before anyone else down here," says Jim Henderson, who worked with Robinette for twelve years as a sports anchor at WWL. "August 2005 finally proved his point." Indeed, Robinette says he produced special reports annually on problems in the wetlands for WWL before station management finally asked him to stop in the late 1980s. "They said everybody thought I was crazy and obsessed," Robinette recalls.

Still, not everyone sees Robinette as a beneficial force in New Orleans these days. His once-warm relationship with Mayor Nagin has devolved to the point where Nagin will no longer return his calls (a common complaint among members of the New Orleans media). Robinette's frequent exhortation

of Nagin, who is black, and other local politicians have alienated many in the city's African-American community. Robinette is clearly vexed by this disconnect with what is, after all, still the majority population in New Orleans. Robinette does get black callers and says he receives a lot of feedback from the African-American community about the show. Yet market surveys contradict this. "You know how big my listenership is in the black community?" he asked one day, before curling his hand into a circle. "Zero."

Clancy DuBos, the political editor of *Gambit*, the city's largest alternative newspaper, says Robinette's difficulty is more a byproduct of the city's larger racial division (which in many ways has been intensified by the stress of rebuilding after Katrina), than anything to do with his show. "It's a natural tension between media and politicians in a town where the media is dominated by whites and politics is dominated by blacks," says DuBos. Robinette estimates he's done about thirty shows in just the last year aimed at addressing the city's racial mistrust—"not just kumbaya, hand-holding talk either," he says—and has conducted on-air roundtables with black political leaders to sort out differences of opinion.

Robinette has been sounding the alarm on suspect levees and coastal erosion since the early 1970s.

ion. But he doesn't think any of it has made an appreciable impact. "I've tried and tried to bridge that divide, but now I'm just tired. You want to say I'm a racist, go ahead. I know it's not true."

Robinette grew up on the bayous of southern Louisiana, the adopted son of an oil-rig worker and his wife. Until age thirteen, when his father died, his family lived in a camp behind a petroleum refinery near the town of Des Allemands (the movie critic Rex Reed also lived there for a time). In contrast to the stereotypical image a Cajun country upbringing might conjure, Robinette was not a rough-and-ready outdoorsman, but a kid with asthma who hated hunting or the idea of killing anything. Instead, he learned the piano and liked to draw. An indifferent student, Robinette washed out of college three times—he never got his degree—and was drafted into the military in 1965. He wound up a member of the so-called brown-water Navy that patrolled Vietnam's waterways in small boats. "Did you ever see the movie *Apocalypse Now*? That was my boat," says Robinette. (John Kerry, the Massachusetts senator and former Democratic presidential nominee, was also a "Riverine" in Vietnam, but, Robinette notes, "he had a bigger boat.") The duty was notoriously hazardous. Robinette was the only survivor from his

original crew, and was wounded twice. He spent months in the hospital recovering from shrapnel wounds he received when his boat was ambushed by enemy rocket fire.

As I spent time with Robinette and listened to his show, it became clear that Vietnam remains the defining moment of his life. Though he is low-key about it, it informs his views on everything from the torture of suspected terrorists (he went through the SERE training that was the basis for the Bush administration's enhanced interrogation program, and recalls being shown propaganda movies about how no Rockefeller had ever served in a war, then being dunked headfirst into a barrel of ice water); to the federal Department of Veterans Affairs (he thinks the VA hospital system is irretrievably broken and should be abolished in favor of sending wounded vets to the best hospitals in the country at taxpayer expense); to the conduct of warfare (he made headlines in 2006 for advocating the use of nuclear weapons to speed the end of the Iraq war, a stance he doesn't apologize for. "The average American doesn't want to know what war is about," he says, with some heat. "They want to wave their little flags and cheer and then run the other way when the women and children start getting killed").

When Robinette returned from the war in 1969, he moved in with his mother and got a job as a janitor on the overnight shift at a local chemical plant. That led to another janitorial job at a small radio station, where he changed the urinal cakes and occasionally filled in reading the weather report (he had been trained as a radio man in the Navy). He was twenty-six, scarred, and going nowhere fast. Soon, though, things began to change. Robinette bluffed his way into a job as a part-time reporter at a radio station in the small town of Houma. The station's owner also had an unused VHF television license and wanted someone from his radio network to organize a news department for his start-up television station. Robinette lied about his experience and got the job ("I told him I had been a 'news director' in college," recalls Robinette). At KHMA, Robinette was basically a one-man operation, shooting stories, editing film, and appearing on the air. His most memorable moment came when a set collapsed during one broadcast, pinning him to his desk while his camera guy was out getting coffee. "I can't breathe. I can't breathe," people on the street would whisper at him for months afterward, mimicking his distress on the air.

In less than a year, Robinette was recruited to WWL-TV in New Orleans as a reporter. There, while filling in as a temporary anchor (the regular anchor went on the air drunk and was fired), Robinette caught the eye of Sherlee Barish, a prominent television agent who happened to be in New Orleans. She arranged for Robinette to audition for jobs in major markets, and he got plum offers, including chances to anchor at flagship stations in Los Angeles and New York.

Less than three years earlier, he'd been cleaning urinals. Now, still shy of thirty, he was on the verge of TV-news stardom. But he turned them all down. "Barish was furious," Robinette recalls with a laugh. "Swore she'd ruin me."

The truth was, Robinette didn't feel ready for the big time. Though his career was taking off, his emotional state was becoming more fragile. Before the war, he says, he'd never

fired a gun or gotten into a fight. Now he was often confrontational at work and getting into brawls after-hours. "He had a big temper back then," recalls Jim Henderson. "Things got to Garland that might roll off someone else's back. He has more of the temperament of an artist." Things got so out of control, Robinette says, that when he went up to WCBs in New York to meet Walter Cronkite, both of his hands were in casts from a fistfight. He cut one cast off himself the night before the meeting so he could shake hands with the broadcasting legend. Robinette says he went through years of counseling and tried several medications to deal with the psychological trauma from the war, but with limited success. He didn't drink or use drugs (aside from his prescription medication), but he smoked heavily and he eventually packed 230 pounds on his five-foot, ten-inch frame. He was a star in New Orleans, but he was bored and restless. He worked seven days a week. He went through three marriages, all of which ended, he says, entirely due to his problems. "I wasn't always a lot of fun to be around," he says.

Eventually, two things helped him keep his demons at bay: exercise (he started running up to seven miles a day) and painting. Though he always liked to sketch, Robinette didn't start to paint seriously until he was past forty. Now he has his own gallery and exhibits regularly around New Orleans. In a studio behind his house, designed by Nancy Rhett, a fellow artist to whom he has been married since 1994, Robinette has several canvases in different stages of completion and much of the nervous tension that surrounds him at the radio station is noticeably absent. His home is decorated with his work, including several portraits of Charley, his twelve-year-old daughter with Rhett and his only child.

As for how long he'll remain on the air, Robinette says he's not sure. He has no immediate plans to stop, but at various points he spoke wistfully of retiring and leaving the city, pursuing his love of painting in some distant, less-troubled landscape. He also says he was approached by a delegation of local businessmen (whom he declines to name) about running for mayor next year when Nagin's term expires, a suggestion he says he quickly dismissed. At times the city and its multitude of problems—staggering violence, dysfunctional politics, economic woes—seem to overwhelm even Robinette's crusading temperament. And, hanging above it all, is the unrelenting specter that New Orleans remains in peril, unprotected by the incompetence of those Robinette rails against each week. The aftermath of Katrina reopened emotional scars from the war that Robinette thought had finally healed, and he's not sure he'd be able to endure another big storm. That the city will flood again, Robinette has no doubt. "We're basically Gulf-front property already," he says with resignation. "People still don't realize how close the sea has come." But as another hurricane season gets under way, Robinette remains at the microphone, fighting a battle he sometimes thinks is already lost. And in the warm and verdant city outside his studio window, the trees are filled with the song of birds. **CJR**

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Ideas + Reviews

SECOND READ

'The Greatest Liar'

Is Defoe's A Journal of the Plague Year a work of journalism?

BY NICHOLSON BAKER

I first read Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* on a train from Boston to New York. That's the truth. It's not a very interesting truth, but it's true. I could say that I first read it sitting on a low green couch in the old smoking room of the Cincinnati Palladium, across from a rather glum-looking Henry Kissinger. Or that I found a beat-up Longman's 1895 edition of Defoe's *Plague Year* in a dumpster near the Recycle-a-Bicycle shop on Pearl Street when I was high on Guinness and roxies, and I opened it and was drawn into its singular, fearful world, and I sat right down in my own vomit and read the book straight through. It would be easy for me to say these things. But if I did, I would be inventing—and, as John Hersey wrote, the sacred rule for the journalist (or the memoirist, or indeed for any nonfiction writer) is: Never Invent.

That's what makes Daniel Defoe, the founder of English journalism, such a thorny shrub. The hoaxers and the embellishers, the fake autobiographers, look on Defoe as a kind of patron saint. Defoe lied a lot. But he also hated his lying habit, at least sometimes. He said the lying made a hole in the heart. About certain events he wanted truth told. And one event he really cared about was the great plague of 1665, which happened when he was about five years old.

A Journal of the Plague Year begins quietly, without any apparatus of learnedness. It doesn't try to connect this recent plague with past plagues. It draws no historical or classical or literary parallels. It just begins: "It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbors, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland." The "I" is not Defoe, but an older proxy, somebody mysteriously named H. F., who says he is a saddler. H. F. lives halfway between Aldgate Church and Whitechapel, "on the left hand or north side of the street." That's all we know about him.

H. F. watches the bills of mortality mount—he keeps track—and he debates with himself whether to stay in town or flee. His brother tells him to save himself, get away. But no, H. F. decides to stay. He listens. He walks around. He sees a man race out of an alley, apparently singing and making clownish gestures, pursued by women and children—surgeons had been at work on his plague sores. "By laying strong caustics on them, the surgeons had, it seems, hopes to break them—which caustics were then upon him, burning his flesh as with a hot iron." H. F. hears screams—many different kinds of screams, and screeches, and shrieks. In an empty street in Lothbury, a window opens suddenly just over his head. "A woman gave three frightful screeches, and then cried, 'Oh! death, death, death!'" There was no other movement. The street was still. "For people had no curiosity now in any case."

At the plague's height, H. F. writes, there were no funerals, no wearing of black, no bells tolled, no coffins. "Whole streets seemed to be desolated," he says, "doors were left open, windows stood shattering with the wind in empty houses for want of people to shut them. In a word, people began to give up themselves to their fears and to think that all regulations and methods were in vain, and that there was nothing to be hoped for but an universal desolation."

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT DEFOE? Very little. He was one of the most prolific men ever to lift a pen, but he wrote almost nothing about himself. Not many letters have survived. Readers have been attributing and de-attributing Defoe's anonymous journalism ever since he died, broke, in Ropemaker's Alley, in 1731. He was almost always writing about someone else—or pretending to be someone else. There are a few engravings of him, and only one surviving prose description. It's unfriendly—in fact it was a sort of warrant for his arrest, printed in a newspaper when Defoe was wanted by the government on a charge of seditious libel. "He is a middle-sized, spare man," said the description, "about forty years old, of a brown complexion, and dark brown-colored hair, but wears a wig; a hooked nose, a sharp chin, grey eyes, and a large mole near his mouth." Anyone who could furnish information leading to his apprehension by her majesty's justices of the peace, said the notice, would receive a reward of fifty pounds.

We know that Defoe, late in life, wrote the first English novels—*Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, about a lonely sailor who sees a man's naked footprint on the beach, and *Moll Flanders* in 1722, about a woman who was "twelve year a whore." We know that he was born about 1660, the son of a London butcher or candle-maker named James Foe. In his twenties, Daniel went into business as a hosier—that is, as a seller of women's stockings. Trade and speculation went well for a while, then less well, and then he had to hide from his creditors, to whom he owed seventeen thousand pounds. He was rescued by friends on high, and began writing pamphlets and poetry.

Soon he was running a large company that made roofing tiles—and the

***Journal* has all the urgency and loopingly prolix insistence of a man of sympathy who has lived through an urban catastrophe and wants to tell you what it was like.**

pamphleteering was surprisingly successful. He added a Frenchifying "de" to his name. In 1701 he produced the most-selling poem up to that time, "The True-Born Englishman," which hymned his native land as a motley nation of immigrants: "Thus, from a mixture of all kinds began / That heterogeneous thing, an Englishman." Another pamphlet—in which, several decades before Swift's "Modest Proposal," he pretended to be a rabid high-churchman who advocated the deportation or hanging of nonconformists—got him clamped in a pillory in 1703 and sent to Newgate Prison.

While in prison he started a newspaper, the *Review*, an antecedent to *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, which Richard Steele and Joseph Addison would launch within a decade. Besides essays and opinion pieces, the *Review* had an early advice column, and a "weekly history of Nonsense, Impertinence, Vice, and Debauchery." That same year, still in prison, he gathered intelligence on a disaster that had visited parts of England. His book, *The Storm*—about what he called "the greatest and the longest storm that ever the world saw"—is one of the earliest extended journalistic narratives in English.

For a faker, Defoe had an enormous appetite for truth and life and bloody specificity. He wanted to know everything knowable about trade, about royalty, about lowlife, about the customs of other countries, about ships, about folk-remedies and quack doctors, about disasters, about scientific advances, and about the shops and streets of London. He listened to stories people told him. "In this way of Talk I was always upon the Inquiry," one of his characters says, "asking Questions of things done in Publick, as well as in Private." But his desire to impersonate and play-act kept surging up and getting him into trouble. He

wanted to pass as someone he wasn't—as a French diplomat, as a Turkish spy, as a fallen woman, as a person who'd seen a ghost, as a pre-Dickensian pickpocket.

He was an especially industrious first-person crime writer. Once he ghostwrote the story of a thief and jailbreaker named Jack Sheppard. To promote its publication, Defoe had Sheppard pause at the gallows and, before a huge crowd, hand out the freshly printed pamphlets as his last testament—or so the story goes. "The rapidity with which this book sold is probably unparalleled," writes an early biographer, William Lee.

Robinson Crusoe is Defoe's most famous hoax. We describe it as a novel, of course, but it wasn't born that way. On its 1719 title page, the book was billed as the strange, surprising adventures of a mariner who lived all alone for eight-and-twenty years on an uninhabited island, "Written by H I M S E L F"—and people at first took this claim for truth and bought thousands of copies. This prompted an enemy satirist, Charles Gildon, to rush out a pamphlet, "The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Daniel de Foe, Formerly of London, Hosier, Who has lived above fifty Years all alone by himself, in the Kingdoms of North and South Britain."

Addison called Defoe "a false, shuffling, prevaricating rascal." Another contemporary said he was a master of "forging a story and imposing it on the world as truth." One of Defoe's nineteenth-century biographers, William Minto, wrote: "He was a great, a truly great liar, perhaps the greatest liar that ever lived."

And yet that's not wholly fair. A number of the things that people later took to be Defoe's dazzlingly colorful tapestries of fabrication, weren't. In 1718, in *Mist's Journal*, Defoe gave a detailed account of the volcanic explosion of the island

of St. Vincent, relying, he said, on letters he had received about it. A century passed, and doubts crept in. One Defoe scholar said that the St. Vincent's story was imaginary; a second said it was tomfoolery; a third said it was "make-believe" and "entirely of Defoe's invention." But the island of St. Vincent had actually blown up, and it had made a lot of noise as it blew. Defoe had done his journalistic best to report this prodigy.

Something similar happened in the case of *A Journal of the Plague Year*. When Defoe published it, he, as usual, left himself off the title page, ascribing the story to H. F. "Written by a Citizen," the title page falsely, sales-boostingly claimed, "Who Continued All the While in London." People believed that for a while; but by 1780, at least, it was generally known that Defoe was the book's author. Then someone did some arithmetic and realized that Defoe had been a young child when the plague struck London—whereupon they began calling the book a historical novel, unequalled in vividness and circumstantiality. Walter Raleigh, in his late nineteenth-century history of the English novel, called the book "sham history." In a study of "pseudofactual" fiction, Barbara Foley says the *Plague Year* "creates the majority of its particulars." And John Hollowell, investigating the literary origins of the New Journalism, writes that Defoe's book is "fiction masquerading as fact." Is it?

ONE NIGHT H. F. VISITS THE FORTY-foot burial trench in Aldgate churchyard, near where he lives. "A terrible pit it was," he writes, "and I could not resist my curiosity to go and see it." He watches the dead cart dip and the bodies fall "promiscuously" into the pit, while a father stands silently by. Then the father, beside himself with grief, suddenly lets out a cry. Another time, H. F. describes the butcher's market. "People used all possible precaution," he says. "When any one bought a joint of meat in the market, they would not take it out of the butcher's hand, but took it off the hooks themselves. On the other hand, the butcher would not touch the money, but have it put into a pot full of vinegar, which he kept for that purpose."

A Journal of the Plague Year is an astounding performance. It's shocking, it's

messy, it's moving, it sobs aloud with its losses, it's got all the urgency and loopingly prolix insistence of a man of sympathy who has lived through an urban catastrophe and wants to tell you what it was like. The fear of death, notes H. F., "took away all bowels of love, all concern for one another." But not universally: "There were many instances of immovable affection, pity and duty." And Defoe's narrator is at pains to discount some of the stories that he hears. He is told, for example, of nurses smothering plague victims with wet cloths to hasten their end. But the details are suspiciously unvarying, and in every version, no matter where he encounters it, the event is said to have happened on the opposite side of town. There is, H. F. judges, "more of tale than of truth" in these accounts.

Still, there's the false frame. The story isn't really being told by H. F., it's being

For a faker, Defoe had an appetite for truth and life and bloody specificity.

told by Defoe. That's clearly a forgery—although more understandable when you learn that Defoe had an uncle with those initials, Henry Foe. Henry was in fact a saddler, who lived in Aldgate near the burial pit. It seems that in order to launch himself into the telling of this overwhelmingly complex story of London's ordeal, Defoe needed to think and write in his uncle's voice. The "I" is more than a bit of commercial-minded artifice. The ventriloquism, the fictional first-person premise, helped Defoe to unspool and make sequential sense of what he knew. He sifted through and used a mass of contemporary published sources, as any journalist would, and he enlivened that printed store with anecdotes that people had told him over the years. (His father could have been a source for the butcher's vinegar pot.) The book feels like something heartfelt,

that grew out of decades of accumulated notes and memories—although written with impressive speed. It doesn't feel like an artificial swizzle of falsifications.

In 1919, a young scholar, Watson Nicholson, wrote a book on the sources of Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. He was quite upset by the notion that the *Journal* was now, without qualification, being called a novel. In his book, Nicholson claimed to have established "overwhelming evidence of the complete authenticity of Defoe's 'masterpiece of the imagination.'" There was not, Nicholson said, "a single essential statement in the *Journal* not based on historic fact." True, Defoe had a way of embroidering, but even so, "the employment of the first person in the narrative in no sense interferes with the authenticity of the facts recorded."

Other critics agreed. In 1965, Frank Bastian checked what Defoe said in the *Journal* against Pepys's *Diary*, which Defoe couldn't have seen because it wasn't decoded until a century later. "Characters and incidents once confidently asserted to be the products of Defoe's fertile imagination," wrote Bastian, "repeatedly prove to have been factual." Introducing the Penguin edition of the *Plague Year* in 1966, Anthony Burgess wrote: "Defoe was our first great novelist because he was our first great journalist."

Six thousand people a month died in London's plague, most of them poor. The locations of many burial pits passed from memory. One was later used, according to Defoe, as a "yard for keeping hogs"; another was rediscovered when the foundation of a grand house was being dug: "The women's skulls were quite distinguished by their long hair." Is the author being a reporter here, or a novelist? We don't know. We want to know.

Daniel Defoe seems to have needed a pocket full of passports to get where he was going. But the moral of his story, at least for the nonfictionist, still is: Never Invent. People love hoaxes in theory—from a distance—but they also hate being tricked. If you make up sad things and insist that they're true, nobody afterward will fully trust what you write. **CJR**

NICHOLSON BAKER's most recent book, *Human Smoke*, was published last year. A novel, *The Anthologist*, will be published in September.

Why John Lennon Matters

The case for professional pop-music critics in an amateur age

BY JACOB LEVENSON

A JOHN LENNON SONG FLOATED OVER OUR RENTAL-CAR RADIO AS MY FATHER and I wound our way past silos and dairy farms in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Lennon's voice made me nostalgic for the late 1960s, which was odd, because it was the late 1980s and I was a teenager who had only known pop charts ruled by the likes of Rick Astley, Tiffany, and Belinda Carlisle. "Why doesn't my generation have any real artists like Lennon?" I asked bitterly.

My dad shot back that he never understood why The Beatles were considered great artists. "You're always listening to lyrics," he said, slipping the knife in. "What made John Lennon so important?"

What a stunningly stupid and provocative question, I thought.

My father should have known better. He had protested the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention and had written a dissertation on how children are politicized. The really irritating part, though, was that I knew saying, "Because John Lennon was *John Fucking Lennon*," was no kind of answer. And if I couldn't explain why John Lennon mattered, how could I justify my obsession with R.E.M., Talking Heads, and the Clash? Or why I, a white kid from California, knew most of the rhymes from N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*, and could (and did) rap the profane lyrics of "8 Ball" while waiting for my 99-cent Whopper at the Burger King drive-through? The music was mind invasion. A pop song could take me into a world I had never seen, a separate sensibility, and four minutes later I would emerge changed. Of course, I didn't quite have that formulation at my fingertips. So I accused my father of trying to suck the pleasure from what mattered to me.

The reason Lennon mattered, and the reason I still listen to music that often amounts to bad teen poetry and dance beats, has to do with the quality that unifies the ever more fractious pop-music universe and distinguishes it from classical and jazz: anyone can make it. Pop music is not unprofessional. It is anti-professional. This is not to suggest that the pop canon is devoid of trained musicians, composers, and producers, or that all pop music is artistically equal. Rather, it is to say that the notion that anyone can write a pop song—be they hip-hoppers or cowboys, metal heads or folkies, post-punk feminists or members of Banana Blender Surprise—has made pop music one of the brightest signals of popular sentiment and cultural transformation of the last forty years.

This proximity to the culture is also what has made pop-music writing arguably the most urgent and politically tinged form of criticism of the same period. Whether it's Joan Didion reflecting on the determined innocence of youth culture as she wandered through Joan Baez's Institute for the Study of Nonviolence

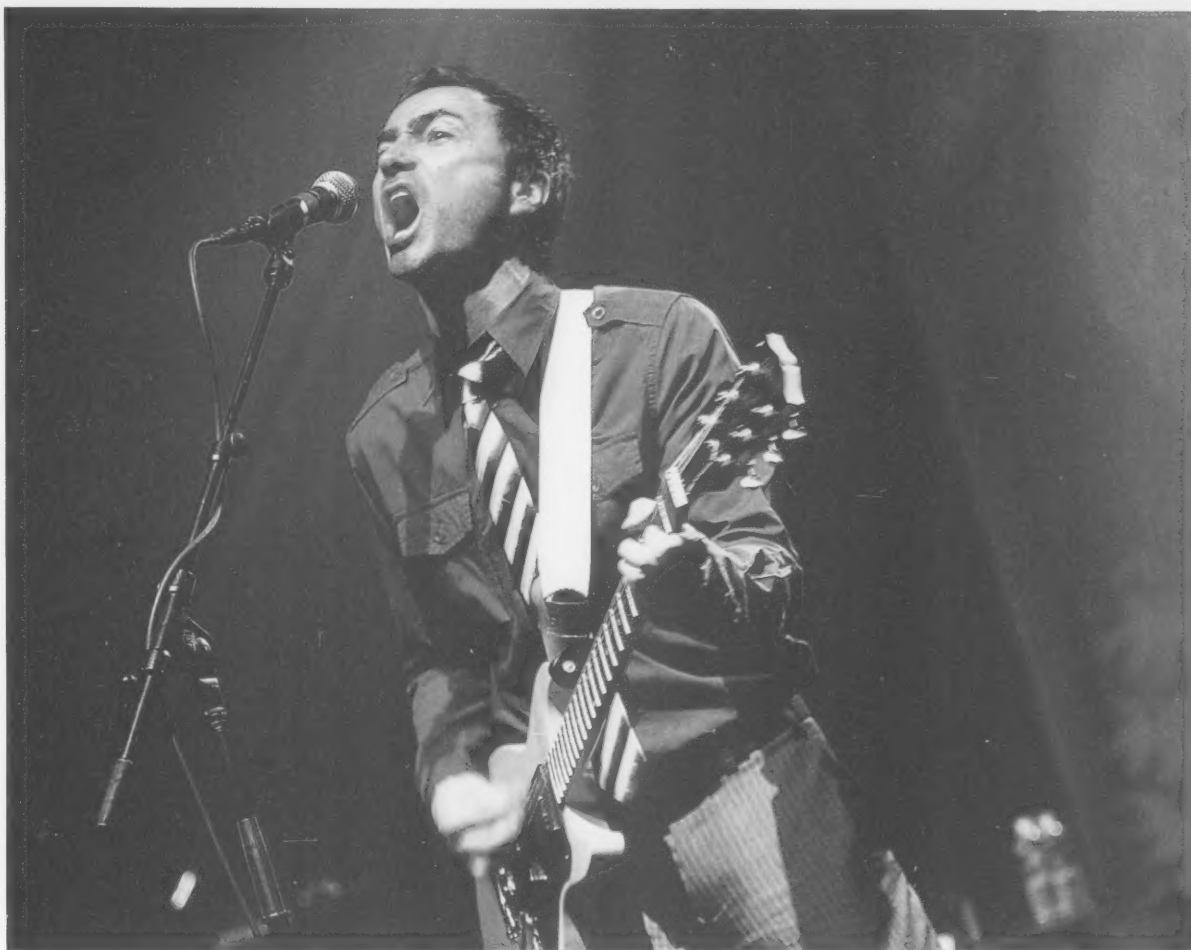
in the mid-1960s, or Chuck Klosterman writing in the early part of this decade about the meaning of glam metal in the Midwest, music writers have made the case that to write about pop music is to illuminate the zeitgeist.

During those same four decades, pop-music criticism evolved from a fugitive journalistic impulse (as the critic Eric Weisbard has called it) into a fixture of the media firmament. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New Republic* employ pop critics, as do regional papers ranging from the *Detroit Free Press* to *The Oregonian* to *The Sacramento Bee*.

Yet, at a moment when the nature of American culture and political identity is in flux, critical writing about pop music has grown steadily more irrelevant. This is in part a consequence of the pressure the Internet has exerted on journalism at large: the venues are shrinking, along with the fees and the audience. But these problems have been especially acute for music writers, because the Internet has simultaneously undermined their utilitarian function as consumer guides by making music free. As Ann Powers, the chief pop-music critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, put it to me: What value is there in writing that the latest Metallica album is good, when readers can log onto the band's MySpace page, listen for free, and decide for themselves? It's not as though one needs to be an ethnomusicologist to determine that "Enter Sandman" rocks.

But pinning the entire rap on the Internet allows music critics to dodge some painful but necessary questions. How should journalists illuminate the zeitgeist at a moment when the dominant cultural narrative is that there is no dominant cultural narrative? Do critics have any special license to serve as pop music's cultural interlocutors when anyone with an Internet connection can attempt to do the same thing? In other words: if anyone can make pop music, and anyone can be a pop-music critic, do we really need professional critics to tell us what it all means?

These questions hung over the conclave of prominent music writers that Powers gathered at the University of Southern California in September 2008. She had called the forum "The Death of



The who? Bands like The Shins have something to say, but music writers no longer function as cultural arbiters.

the Critic,” and the title, though morose, was apt. As the panelists tried to diagnose their ailing profession, the usual suspects were trotted out: the leveling effect of the blogosphere, the Web’s fracturing of the cultural narrative. But perhaps critics should consider the possibility that the animating argument for pop-music criticism—that the music is important because it is a projection of popular experience—is exactly what has made it difficult for journalists to gain traction in the current era. We are living in an age when the audience is happy to express its opinions without any assistance from the press. Which is to say: pop-music critics are the casualties of a culture war that they helped to wage and win.

TO UNDERSTAND HOW POP-MUSIC CRITICS were soldiers in a war that rendered them irrelevant is to understand Robert Christgau’s critical sensibility. Christgau is best known for his consumer guide and album-rating system. But his more important legacy is the *Village Voice* music page, where as editor between 1974 and 1985, and then chief music critic until 2006, he helped to define a populist argument for why the music mattered. At the same time, he built a section that bridged two generations of critics, with Greil Marcus, Gary Giddins, Richard Meltzer, Lester Bangs, Janet Maslin, and James Wolcott in the first wave, and Ann Powers, Eric Weisbard, R.J. Smith, Greg Tate, and Sasha Frere-Jones among the second.

By the time Christgau arrived at the *Voice*, Jann Wenner had already made the journalistic case that pop music was the language of the counterculture, the place where its utopian social vision met its politics. The *Rolling Stone* founder developed this connection not through rigorous argument, but by placing music in the context of political reporting. This had two effects. Wenner’s focus on the biggest names in pop music made the left-leaning political journalism seem part of a broad cultural insurgency. And the political journalism made the pop music seem as though it possessed a cohesive political message (even when it didn’t, which was often).

Christgau, who considered himself to the left of Wenner politically, nonethe-

less rejected the programmatic assumption that pop music produced predictable political ends. In his calculus, pop music was important precisely because it had no obligation to prefabricated ideology. In other words, while any one musician or song might have a political aim, what really mattered was the collective pressure exerted by disparate voices on the governing cultural narrative.

To a certain degree, Christgau's critical method was self-referential. He had no aesthetic or political litmus test to determine that Cat Stevens's *Buddha and the Chocolate Box* was terrible and that Van Morrison's *Moondance* was great (although he was allergic to nostalgia and the creeping pretension of the rock-and-roll auteur). Instead, he figured out why he liked a given recording, put that process into words, and then hashed it out with his readers and fellow writers.

Yet this personal approach by no means excluded broader social and political ideas. In fact, listening and reacting often became an exercise in social criticism for Christgau, because he conceived of pop as engaged with

surgency they were covering, and their aim was to translate, amplify, and argue its messages. From a journalistic perspective, this meant that to write pop-music criticism was to break cultural news. The audience, and the artists, paid attention. Billy Joel, who Christgau once called "a force of nature and bad taste" (note the backhanded compliment), tore up his detractor's reviews onstage. And Sonic Youth, who he dubbed a band of "impotent bohos," upped the ante with a song called "I Killed Christgau With My Big Fuckin' Dick."

Almost from the outset, however, there was a problem with Christgau's view of pop music as a transformative force in the democratic equation. The pop-music industry was not only hugely profitable but also crassly commercial. And as the 1970s wore on, it ever more transparently capitalized on the mythology that pop music was authentically anti-authoritarian.

Punk helped to solve this problem. Political, angry, unromantic, and funny, it was an astringent for the countercultural conceit that it was possible to be both radical and broadly popular. More

Here was an anticipation of the identity politics that would shape cultural criticism over the next decade or so. "We thought," she told me recently, "that we were making a world that was a world within the world."

POWERS AND HER HUSBAND, ERIC Weisbard, landed at the *Voice* in the early 1990s. The paper's music section, which Christgau envisioned as a public square for writers to declare pop's significance in all of its varied guises, was the perfect home for her. "We assumed," Powers told me, "that our identities were our politics"—an assumption she put into practice at the *Voice*, along with such kindred spirits as Erik Davis, Greg Tate, and Lisa Jones. Pop music, to her, was political theater, and writing about it was political advocacy. While Powers didn't limit herself to covering women, at the *Voice* her feminist politics were transparent in her coverage of the Riot Grrrl movement, P J Harvey, and Tori Amos.

It wasn't only at the *Voice* that the emerging subgenres of pop were considered proxies for the social and political sensibilities of various subcultures. This ethos was common to the prominent national music magazines of the 1990s. *Spin* was the home of the indie rock and hip-hop generation. *Sassy* was aimed at feminist girls. *Vibe* targeted blacks, and *The Source* was for hardcore hip-hopers. The writers for these magazines socialized together, and the *Voice* continued to be a place where they aired their ideas in print. This is not to suggest that every piece of writing—or even most of them—viewed the music as a political cudgel to forge and defend subcultures. But many of these writers seemed to put the melting-pot philosophy firmly behind them. As they saw it, pop music didn't dissolve the boundaries between listeners; it reminded them of exactly who they were.

Now, thirteen years after Powers left the *Voice*, this equivalence of personal identity, pop culture, and politics seems both overheated and out of line with how Americans listen to music. For one thing, identity politics have fallen out of intellectual vogue. For another, the idea that one must relate to Eminem's fantasy of killing his wife in order to enjoy the song "97 Bonnie and Clyde" never

Christgau and his contemporaries were participant observers in the musical insurgency they were covering, and their aim was to translate, amplify, and argue its messages.

mainstream culture. "Rock-and-roll was a medium that insisted on individual freedom, on pleasure, and, at the same time, created social connections among disparate people," he told me recently. He went on to say: "Carried to its emotional conclusion, [the music] put pressures on capitalism. I looked for writers who could elucidate the details of these tendencies and their contradictions."

Christgau and his contemporaries were not New Journalists, slyly challenging the strictures of objectivity by writing in the first person. They were participant observers in the musical in-

significant to the critical enterprise, it was flagrantly anti-commercial. And this awakened a new type of pop-music critic who, though grounded in the gospel of Christgau, had lost interest in transforming the mainstream.

In 1980, Ann Powers cut out the lyrics of "Waiting for the Clampdown," the Clash's screed against betraying youthful idealism, and hung them inside her Seattle high-school locker. She didn't consider herself part of the counterculture. Rather, Powers imagined herself inhabiting a compartmentalized pocket on the edge of the mainstream.

made complete intuitive sense. Still, the more elusive question is why the critical establishment failed to find a new argument for the importance of pop music (let alone its own role as interlocutor). And that discussion must begin with the alternative press and its ubiquitous successor, the Internet.

The sensibility of pop-music criticism has always found its fullest voice in the alternative press. The reason for this is that the most memorable music critics have been self-styled members of an insurgency. In this way they, like the pop musicians they covered, have struck an anti-professional pose. Never mind that many of them were and are literary stylists, products of the Ivy League and its equivalent, with a fair amount of theoretical expertise. They presented themselves as members of the *audience*, who, by virtue of their position in the press, were able to intervene in the national conversation, and to make room for voices and ideas that might not otherwise find their way into print, or even television and film. When Jon Landau argued for the importance of Bruce Springsteen, or when Greg Tate did similar honors on behalf of Public Enemy, they were both convening an audience and declaring the cultural and political significance of its tastes.

By giving everyone the ability to publish, the Internet represented a victory for this populist sensibility. But it also took the critical prerogative out at the knee. Add to that the fact that during the Web's rapid maturation, many music writers were preoccupied with unpopular pop music (there's an oxymoron for you), and it becomes harder and harder to make the case that a professional critic's opinion should be taken more seriously than that of the Internet Everyman: the blogger.

THE INTERNET DID NOT MAKE THE music irrelevant. Indeed, a case can be made that this is a particularly fascinating moment in pop-music history. Hip-hop, which has succeeded rock-and-roll as the dominant genre, is arguably the most direct line to urban black America ever invented. Indie bands like The Shins, the Magnetic Fields, and the Fiery Furnaces have won national audiences without the benefit of mass radio or tele-

The Internet took the critical prerogative out at the knee.

vision exposure. And *American Idol* is perhaps the presiding cultural metaphor for American meritocracy and the currency of celebrity. Nor did the Internet truly balkanize the broader culture, which has always been a fluid and multifaceted beast. Rather, it revealed the volatility of the cultural moment—and reminded us of just how complicated it can be to get a critical grip on even a song-length fragment of it.

However, before critics could develop a new case for the contemporary significance of pop music, they had a more basic task in front of them: they needed to revive their own interest in what was truly popular. This was the gist of Kelefa Sanneh's 2004 *New York Times* piece, "The Rap Against Rockism," in which he blasted the critical preoccupation with rock (including such subgenres as grunge and punk) to the exclusion of commercial pop. Since the latter was dominated by brown-skinned musicians, Sanneh argued, this favoritism was essentially racist:

Rockism means idolizing the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lionizing punk while barely tolerating disco; loving the live show and hating the music video; extolling the growling performer while hating the lip-syncher. Over the past decades, these tendencies have congealed into an ugly sort of common sense. Rock bands record classic albums, while pop stars create "guilty pleasure" singles. It's supposed to be self-evident: U2's entire oeuvre deserves respectful consideration, while a spookily seductive song by an R&B singer named Tweet can only be, in the smug words of a recent VH1 special, "awesomely bad."

The rockism argument had been circulating among critics since the 1980s. But Sanneh was the first to so acidly and

systematically unravel four decades of critical contortions designed to distinguish legitimate pop from bubblegum.

His manifesto was followed by a widely discussed piece in *Slate*, which raised the banner for what Jody Rosen called "poptimism." Rosen denounced any effort to distinguish high from low in pop music. If a writer thinks that Rihanna's dancehall single "Pon de Replay" is better than the second side of *Abbey Road*, then he or she should give it critical love. Pavement is noise pollution? Say it. In this way, poptimism restored Christgau's idea that pop music (and implicitly, pop-music criticism) is an exercise in democracy, precisely because it does not conform to top-down notions of what the culture should look or sound like.

At the same time, poptimism illuminated the degree to which the politics of pop criticism is at loose ends. Writers have historically treated the music as a stand-in for liberation politics, be they sexual (Lou Reed), racial (Chuck Berry), working-class (Bruce Springsteen), or feminist (Ani DiFranco). Poptimism torpedoed such efforts to distinguish politically good music from bad. It also roped in performers whose manipulation of violence, gender, and race don't fit the standard liberation narrative: Eminem (modern-day Bob Dylan or homophobic misogynist?), Beyoncé (feminist or de-based sex toy?), the whole genre of gangster rap (black male empowerment or hyper-capitalist-racial dystopia?). This expansion of the critical canvas, not so coincidentally, put the fun back in pop criticism. What it could not do was define a function for professional critics now that so much of their political ballast had been thrown overboard.

One solution is to focus more intently on musicality. Sasha Frere-Jones in particular has brought a musician's expertise to his writing at *The New Yorker*. His 2007 essay on Mariah Carey's vocal range is an impressive example of this kind of explanatory journalism. But most critics—even those with a grounding in musical theory—are not musicians. For them, limiting the conversation to the technical facility of a pop star is, as Powers pointed out, a little like thinking about a painting as blue.

No, pop music is about the zeitgeist,

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and pop-music criticism was invented to reveal and critique it. So what can Powers make of the fifteen-year-old girl and the girl's mother she observed at the Los Angeles Forum, singing along to Nickelback frontman Chad Kroeger's lascivious lyrics? Just a few years ago, a band like Nickelback would most likely have been dismissed as too commercial, artistically banal, and politically repugnant to warrant critical attention. Now Powers was determined to crack the cultural code of the band, the genre (which she dubbed Flyover Rock), the girl, the fans, and the middle-class world they inhabited.

Her solution was deep reporting. She interviewed the band, the producers, marketers, fellow critics, and social historians—not to mention the girl's mother. The argument she staked out was that Flyover Rock creates a fantasy space out of time and political context, in which fans suspend their awareness of real-world tensions. In such an environment, she suggested, an otherwise discerning middle-aged mother can enjoy sexually explicit music with her teenage daughter, without attaching any political or even social meaning to it.

The veracity of Powers's argument is almost secondary to the case her method makes for the authority of professional criticism. The depth of her reporting distinguishes it from the opinion-driven environment of the blogosphere, where her initial, flawed assumptions about the band and its politics would have found a natural home. And she breaks newspaper convention—which typically makes clear distinctions between news and social criticism—by delivering an authoritative appraisal of how the culture is working. What she didn't do, as she might have done at the *Voice* in the early 1990s, was zero in on the band's troubling gender politics.

Many writers who share Powers's ambition to use mass culture to develop social arguments have taken refuge in the universities, where they may find it easier to examine the political implications of their research. Josh Kun, for instance, is a professor of journalism and American studies and the director of The Popular Music Project at the University of Southern California. In his book, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and*

America, he contends that pop music remains a powerful medium of political and cultural opposition in Mexican immigrant communities.

Kun begins his book with a scene of Los Tigres del Norte singing their Mexican-American liberation anthem, "*Mis Dos Patrias*" ("My Two Homelands"), in the courtroom after their naturalization ceremony. He then proceeds to place the song in the context of California's immigration debate, which came to a head with the 1994 passage of Proposition 187, which denied health and education benefits to undocumented workers. Kun's argument: thanks to current immigration policy, Latinos are formulating a political identity in which they see themselves as in, but not of, America.

Like his journalistic colleagues, Kun is still experimenting with the use of pop music as a tool for contemporary cultural analysis. In many cases, he starts with a specific song, then excavates the historical, cultural, political, and human arguments around it. At the moment, though, it's easy for such individual efforts to get lost in the media sprawl.

Here is where the lessons of *Rolling Stone* and *The Village Voice* are most instructive. One reason these publications fired the public imagination, and why they are still cited and debated, is because they possessed an identifiable theory of the significance of pop music. In each instance, their politics drove their critical appraisals. Perhaps the first task in reestablishing the value of the critical perspective is to reverse that equation—to announce the authority of the critical method first, and then grapple with the political implications of the work. That would be an insurgency to reckon with. Would the pretensions of such an enterprise put it at odds with the populist instinct that first sparked pop-music criticism? Perhaps. Can writers be trusted not to be blinkered by its conceits? Probably not. Then again, all the fun of writing and reading about a figure as resonant and infinitely malleable as John Lennon lies in the distinct possibility of being wrong. **CJR**

JACOB LEVENSON is a writer who lives in Brooklyn. He is the author of *The Secret Epidemic: The Story of AIDS and Black America*.

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

BY JAMES BOYLAN

Bloggers on the Bus: How the Internet Changed Politics and the Press

By Eric Boehlert
Free Press
280 pages, \$26

IN HIS CLASSIC *THE BOYS on the Bus*, Timothy Crouse showed how a cluster of big-foot reporters from the old print and broadcast media steered the narrative of the 1972 presidential campaign. In Eric Boehlert's *Bloggers on the Bus*, the vehicle in question has become purely figurative—a way of saying that influence has now been passed from the old bunch to a raggletaggle sprawl of liberal bloggers, scattered from Alaska to Brazil and known collectively as “the netroots.” (The coinage mashes together “grassroots” and “Internet.”) Although the netroots were mostly pro-Obama through the 2008 campaign, and helped him by challenging many of the falsehoods spread about him, this support was neither uncritical nor undivided. Nor, on the other side, did the Obama organization choose to associate itself closely with the bloggers, no doubt viewing them as uncontrollable. In general, Boehlert admires the work of the netroots. Yet he also describes ferocious internecine debates, such as the division over sexist attacks on Hillary Clinton, and the disillusion over Obama's uncertain positions on warrantless wiretaps. Overall, he shows how the work of the netroots—for example, a citizen journalist's



impromptu tape of Obama's “bitter” remarks—offers hope that ordinary people, not at all bigfooted, may alter the political landscape.

Tabloid Valley: Supermarket News and American Culture

By Paula E. Morton
University Press of Florida
207 pages, \$24.95

TABLOID VALLEY WAS A real place, more or less. Its center was Lantana, Florida, a downscale little town between Miami and Palm Beach. In 1971, it became the home of the *National Enquirer*, the sometimes-muckraking celebrity tabloid, run by Generoso Pope Jr. and staffed in great part by nifty Brits. After Pope died in 1988, investors bought both the *Enquirer* and its more fanciful sibling, the *Weekly World News*, as well as Rupert Murdoch's *Star*, thus creating American Media Incorporated. (The Lantana headquarters had to be abandoned after it received anthrax-laced mail in 2001.) At its zenith, the Greater Tabloid Valley stretched into every supermarket across the land; the *National Enquirer* peaked at six million copies when it carried a heavily retouched photo of Elvis in his casket.

In common with other print media, the celebrity tabs have declined, but they are far from dead, and both the *Enquirer* and the *Star* continue to mount the figurative heads of straying politicians over their mantelpieces—former Senator John Edwards being one of the recent trophies. Paula E. Morton, a freelancer based in Florida, briskly traces the history of the genre and provides many reproductions of famous and notorious pages. Who can forget such gems as BAT CHILD FOUND IN CAVE! OR HALF-HUMAN HALF-FISH ARE WASHING UP IN FLORIDA!?

Bite the Hand That Feeds You: Essays and Provocations

By Henry Fairlie
Edited and with an introduction by Jeremy McCarter
Foreword by Leon Wieseltier
A New Republic Book,
Yale University Press
355 pages, \$30

NEARLY TWENTY YEARS after his death at a less-than-advanced age, Henry Fairlie (1924–1990) is now honored with a generous sampling of the work he did for his last employer, *The New Republic*. Jeremy McCarter of *Newsweek* has done a judicious job assembling the contents. He also supplies a biographical

sketch of Fairlie, documenting his quick rise through London journalism, the gathering troubles brought on by thoughtless spending, drinking, and philandering, and his assignment to America in 1965. Fairlie never returned to Britain, nor did he change his way of life. His disregard for his own welfare prevented him from gathering in the rewards heaped upon so many American journalists—the fellowships, the lecture fees, the honorary degrees. Fairlie sounded only faintly envious when he tabulated these emoluments in a 1984 article. Indeed, he spent his latter days sleeping in the magazine's office. But the seediness of his life never seeped into his resplendent writing. He may be best remembered for providing the modern definition of “The Establishment” as the encompassing official and social network that, among other things, protected the British spies Burgess and Maclean. Politically, Fairlie described himself as a Tory, but his earmark was independence. He admired Churchill and FDR, and despised Reagan, or at least Reaganism. He defended big government as a necessity—and *en passant*, flayed George Will for faux learning. It all remains fresh and reading through it is like attending a circus. **CJR**

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the Columbia Journalism Review and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst.

Heart of Stone

A distinguished new biography of a career contrarian

BY ROBERT G. KAISER

WHEN JOHN F. KENNEDY WAS ASSASSINATED in November 1963, millions of Americans succumbed to a shared sense of despair, but not I. F. Stone. The only radical commentator with a wide audience in the United States, Stone was then proprietor of *I. F. Stone's Bi-Weekly*, a newsletter he and one assistant produced for about twenty thousand subscribers, each of whom paid \$5 a year to get it in the mail.

Most of Stone's subscribers were more liberal than radical, and it seems a fair presumption that most were devastated by Kennedy's death. Soon after the weekend of national mourning that put JFK in his Arlington grave, Stone wrote: "Perhaps the truth is that in some ways John Fitzgerald Kennedy died just in time." He saw Kennedy trapped on two fronts: by a Congress dominated by racist southerners (true enough), and by a foreign policy in thrall to cold war reflexes that were leading the country astray (Vietnam was just beginning). Assassination, in Stone's view, was "the only satisfactory way out" of these traps.

Then he reminded his readers that their government, Kennedy's government, routinely employed murder as a tool of statecraft. "How many of us—on the Left now—did not welcome the assassination of Diem and his brother Nhu in South Vietnam?" Diem was the South Vietnamese leader whom Kennedy had turned against; he and his brother were killed in an American-sponsored coup less than three weeks before the assassination in Dallas. "We all reach for the dagger, or the gun, in our thinking when it suits our political view to do so. We all believe the end justifies the means. We all favor murder, when it reaches our own hated opponents. In this sense we share the guilt with Oswald and Ruby and the rightist crackpots. When the right to kill is so universally accepted, we should not be surprised if our young President was slain. It is not just the ease in obtaining guns, it is the ease in obtaining excuses, that fosters assassination."

These were the words of a most unusual man. Perhaps it's not surprising that he has inspired four biographies over the past twenty years. (It seems worth noting that Walter Lippman and James Reston, arguably the two most famous journalists of Stone's time, have each been the subject of just one biography during that same period.) Myra MacPherson published the excellent *All Governments Lie!*

American Radical: The Life and Times of I. F. Stone

By D. D. Guttenplan
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux
224 pages, \$24.95

in 2006. Now comes D. D. Guttenplan's thoroughly engaging and informative *American Radical: The Life and Times of I. F. Stone*, a labor of love that has occupied the author for nearly two decades.

As his startling commentary on Kennedy's assassination suggests, I. F. Stone marched resolutely to the beat of his own drummer. No other influential twentieth-century journalist had such impeccable credentials as an independent man. Stone was a romantic, sometimes an idealist, sometimes a dreamy radical who refused to acknowledge the chinks in the armor of the causes and persons he embraced. But he was never in anyone's pocket, and when he went astray—initially embracing Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution as a noble undertaking, for example—he usually managed to yank himself back to his unshakable values. By 1961 he was able to see that Cuba was falling into line behind the Soviet Union. "The Fidelistas are living in a dream world," he wrote after a visit to the island.

Stone's outlook on the world was profoundly skeptical, but almost never cynical. He was, as Guttenplan writes, "a troublemaker all his life." Making trouble was his cause, and his fun. And he was good at it.

He was born Isadore Feinstein on Christmas Eve in 1907. He renamed himself I. F. Stone thirty years later, by which time he had mastered his craft at various New Jersey papers as well as the *New York Post*. He went on to produce millions of words—for the short-lived *PM* in New York City, for *The Nation* and *The New Republic* magazines, and then in the McCarthy era, when J. Edgar Hoover investigated him as a possible Soviet spy and mainstream media shied away from him, for his own newsletter, which gave him total freedom. At the end of his career he wrote prolifically for *The New York Review of Books*. Stone was a crusader, but also a dogged pursuer of facts. He was the best reader of government budgets and reports that I have ever known. And he was never intimidated by an official line, no matter how popular.

I had friendly relations with Stone in Washington in the 1970s and 1980s, when he was basking in his status as an elder statesman. In most obvious ways, it was

the best period of his extraordinary life. By the time Jimmy Carter moved into the White House, Izzy Stone was a man of some means, living comfortably with his beloved, all-suffering wife Esther in a leafy neighborhood of northwest Washington, receiving guests and going out to dinner at the uptown branch of the Peking Restaurant, a mediocre Chinese joint to which he was partial.

Then in his seventies, Stone remained utterly devoted to the news of the day, though failing eyesight made him dependent on Esther, who read to him for hours, and on the newfangled devices called computers. With difficulty he could make out words in very big type on the green-on-gray computer screens of that era. Whenever I saw him, he wanted to talk about what was going on that day, that week.

In one sense, reading his life story after the fact has been a source of great frustration for me. Stone was an active observer of (and participant in) some of the great dramas of the twentieth century. When we met, he (and I) wanted to discuss the latest news, so I never talked to him about those earlier events. Guttenplan is particularly good on the 1930s, '40s, and '50s—he cares as much about Stone's times as about his life. The rich historical context also makes his subject's career all the more remarkable.

Stone's perspective was not that of a typical journalist; he was too radical, and too committed to his causes, to simply report his findings. Sometimes, as Guttenplan makes painfully clear, Stone went way over the top. For example, he was much too willing to credit the Bolshevik revolution with a radical commitment to a new order. Throughout the 1930s he wrote syrupy, sympathetic accounts of Stalin's Soviet Union. Stone was also a staunch believer in and promoter of the Popular Front, a loose alliance of leftists who considered the struggle with Nazism the paramount cause of the decade. Indeed, he was personally terrified of the possibility of fascism in America, a fear that helped persuade him to exchange the transparently Jewish Feinstein for Stone.

He never wavered in his belief that people on "the left" had to stick together, even if the company wasn't always the most savory. For him, the left was the

force that could support African-American rights, freedom of speech, and economic fairness, and oppose militarism and war. These were Stone's big causes. They were more important than the shortcomings and misdemeanors of

Stone was too committed to his causes to simply report his findings.

various individuals. "I still believe," he wrote in 1950, "that the Left will hang separately if it cannot hang together. I think the cold war is aimed much more at us [American radicals] here at home than at Russia.... I am content to find myself still with the unrespectable, red as well as pink."

Yet when finally confronted by the realities of the U.S.S.R. on a visit in 1956, Stone finally overcame three decades of fuzzy thinking about Joseph Stalin and the system he created. In the *Weekly*, he confided: "The way home from Moscow has been an agony for me.... I feel like a swimmer underwater who must rise to the surface or his lungs will burst. Whatever the consequences, I have to say what I really feel after seeing the Soviet Union and carefully studying the statements of its leading officials. *This is not a good society and it is not led by honest men.*" He put those last phrases in italics in his newsletter.

To this day, American conservatives try to discredit Stone by portraying him as a Soviet agent, though the only evidence they can produce are KGB cables suggesting that Stone shared information on occasion with actual spies. I have done the same many times, in Washington and in Moscow, as have countless other American reporters, none of them spies. The idea that Stone would ever subject himself to the discipline of an ideological force like Soviet communism is laughable, yet the anti-Stone campaign was revived again this spring. He would have loved the spectacle.

Guttenplan has written a wonderful

book. I would pick just two nits with him. One is stylistic: at times he seems incapable of stopping himself from sharing every tidbit he has gathered about specific episodes, and some of his footnotes come off as pedantic.

The second is more substantive. Stone, Guttenplan writes near the end of his book, "was a very great investigative reporter, probably the greatest solo practitioner ever. But there are limits to what one man can do, even a man as gifted and tenacious as I. F. Stone, especially when he can't or won't cultivate the insider sources who are ultimately essential for the most spectacular Washington scoops."

Guttenplan, who is the London correspondent for *The Nation*, has never worked as a reporter in Washington, and he misunderstands the situation of those of us who do. I suspect that Stone's work will look much better to our descendants than that of Seymour Hersh or Bob Woodward or any of the fine reporters who cultivated those human, insider sources. Their scoops have always tended to be ephemeral. Many of Stone's were not. He figured out, among much else, that the Vietnam War was a hopeless cause before the first Marines landed in South Vietnam. And he wrote his conclusions bluntly, when the Washington press corps was dreaming of successful counterinsurgency warfare.

Lippman is assured a place in history because of his youthful brilliance, but his journalism from the end of World War II onward is likely to be forgotten. The same fate awaits Reston, I suspect—as well as Joseph Alsop, Joseph Kraft, Marquis Childs, or any of the bloviators of our own time. But Guttenplan (as well as MacPherson) persuades me that Stone will fare differently. He was smarter than nearly all of us who worked in his guild, knew more history, and was more open to unfashionable thinking. As for fashionable thinking, it was rarely a match for what went on inside his own extraordinary head. **CJR**

ROBERT G. KAISER joined *The Washington Post* in 1963, and is now an associate editor of the paper. He has reported from London, Saigon, Moscow, and, for the last three decades, Washington. His most recent book is *So Damn Much Money: The Triumph of Lobbying and the Corrosion of American Government*.

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COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Overload!

Edifice Rex

BY MICHAEL SCHUDSON AND DANIELLE HAAS



IT WAS BILLED "THE FIGHT OF THE CENTURY" before a single punch was thrown: Jack Johnson versus Jim Jeffries, black versus white for the 1910 heavyweight championship. In Reno, Nevada, thousands gathered to watch Johnson defend his title, while in Manhattan tens of thousands more gathered outside the *New York Times* building for the next best thing to a ringside seat—a blow-by-blow account that flashed on an electronic board. Election nights and other big news events drew similar crowds to the paper's Times Square home, which used spotlights to signal ballot results.

By 1952, the rise of television had snapped this physical connection between the newspaper's home and its public. That year's election-night crowd was "the least demonstrative" on record, "without voice, without the traditional horns and bells, and utterly without enthusiasm," the *Times* reported the next day.

The Internet's ascent over the last decade has eroded another physical bond between people and newspapers: an increasing number of readers no longer hold print and pulp in their hands. Last year, according to a Pew survey, was the first in which more people got their news online for free than from a paid-for print publication.

This loss in readers' physical connection to newspapers gets an interesting new treatment in a study by Brigham Young communications professor Dale Cressman in the Winter edition of *Journalism History*. Cressman, a former television news producer, traces the rise and fall of journalism's once precedent-setting architectural wonders: the Pulitzer Building on Park Row that was the first to soar higher than any church steeple in New York; James Gordon Bennett Jr.'s *Herald* building that boasted twenty-six bronze owls with lighted eyes; and Adolph Ochs's *Times* Tower that used more steel than any other building of its day. He follows the historical arc from block parties, fight nights, and spotlights to online products created in anonymous buildings far from the madding crowd.

For Cressman, the reason the relationship between newspapers' readers and their buildings matters is collective memory: no longer confronted with splendid architectural symbols of journalism that draw news-hungry crowds, he says, the public is harder-pressed to retain a sense of the institutions' worth. Citing

In this column, the authors cull current scholarly writing about journalism for fresh ideas. Suggestions for possible mention are welcome at theresearchreport@cjr.org

academic literature on the links between spaces and their symbolic meanings, Cressman may make more of architecture's influence on society than many might be comfortable with. And the study certainly doesn't explain—or claim to—journalism's current woes. But it offers an intriguing suggestion that the fall of the newspaper building as urban icon paralleled the newspaper's drift from a central place in the nation's collective memory. Journalism buildings, Cressman's study indicates, were neither mere bricks and mortar, nor just containers for the activities that took place within; they were civic centers that offered physical reinforcement of the value of journalism and the identification of a city with its newspapers.

At a time when journalism is casting around for new ways to connect with readers, perhaps these physical connections, not just purely informational ones, matter. Of course, there's no returning to the days when newspaper buildings regularly drew crowds—as many as fifty thousand people gathered outside Pulitzer's *World* building for election-night results in 1896. But more modest connections are possible, like panel discussions, newsroom tours, and cultural festivals that draw people to journalism's great(ish) spaces and into close proximity with its practitioners.

That's why Washington's monumental Newseum museum of news, and WNYC's new glass-walled, radio-performance space—where previously hidden hosts, DJs, and guests are visible to hip Soho street traffic—have value. Ditto Slate's live recordings of its popular podcast series, the *TimesTalks* weekly conversation series between reporters and public figures held in the *New York Times* building, and even the satirical *Onion*'s weekly bar-based boozefests for readers held under the auspices of the "Society for the Preservation of Alcohol."

The industry is rightfully concerned with getting more people to value its product enough to pay for it. Reminding them of the spaces, faces, and work involved is part of that effort. **CJR**

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The Lower Case

SLUMP CREATES LACK OF MOBILITY FOR AMERICANS

The New York Times 4/23/09

Soldier turns on comrades

(Bridgeport) *Connecticut Post* 5/12/09

Christian group loses appeal

San Francisco Chronicle 3/18/09

Brazil government rushes aid to flood victims, 32 die

(Appleton, WI) *Post-Crescent* 5/7/09

Senators Seek Citizenship for Shooting Victims

The New York Times 4/8/09

Dubai wants pubic spitting of particular juice banned

(Camarillo, CA) *Ventura County Star* 3/31/09

War hero helps nab dog shooting suspects

The Gainesville (FL) Sun 3/10/09

Standing before a fawning crowd at a private fundraiser in San Francisco last April, Senator Barack Obama's usually finely calibrated rhetoric loosened up.

Columbia Journalism Review March/April 2009

Police: Dead man suspected in pharmacy robberies

The Bellingham (WA) Herald 4/9/09

Turnpike authority plans to sell \$650 in bonds

(Newark, NJ) *Star-Ledger* 4/9/09

Another boy slain under state supervision

(Newark, NJ) *Star-Ledger* 5/1/09

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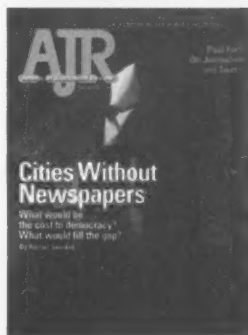


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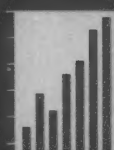
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